VIDEOGAME CULTURE

JAN/FEB 2005 $8.95

# EDGE®

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# Developed Down Under

Why the videogaming world wants a piece of Australia

**PREVIEWED** BROTHERS IN ARMS **SHADOW OF ROME** THE PUNISHER **STEAMBOY** SAMURAI WESTERN **IMPERIAL GLORY**
**REVIEWED** WORLD OF WARCRAFT **GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT** GHOST RECON 2 **PRINCE OF PERSIA 2**


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Was 2004 the best year ever for videogames? It certainly was one of the most important and significant. The gaming industry has seen all sales records smashed into millions of pieces. *Halo 2* set the week one record with 104,000 copies in Australia alone. GTA San Andreas did the predictable by resetting the PS2 record, and *Half-Life 2* did the unpredictable, it became the first major PC release not to be pirated to death within the first week in as long as the **Edge** staff can remember.

Why is that so? Well, online registration via Steam appears to not only have got a whole bunch of self-righteous gamers hot under the collar about requiring net access to start playing *Half-Life 2*. Of course the reality of where that anger comes from can be largely attributed to a gaming audience that is used to using piracy to check stuff out - to "Buy it when I can afford it."

Speaking of affording it, there appears to be no problem for the mainsteam when it comes to paying for a MMORPG subscription if the World of Warcraft sales are any indication. The game literally sold out in all territories that it was launched in within a week. How is it though that the western world suddenly got over this stigma with paying to play? Maybe it didn't. In fact, looking at how much people are prepared to pay for Internet subscriptions, mobile phone bills or the price of a movie ticket, can anyone really argue that the price of a main meal at an average restaurant is too much to keep playing a well serviced game that satiates all month?

So what is it then? Well if the comments from Jason Rubin (Naughty Dog) at the Australian Game Developers Conference 2004 were on the money, it's all because of the IP. Blizzard have amazing intellectual property, and even people who don't know what that term means know that Blizzard have it. When was the last time you played a Blizzard game that sucked? Exactly, which is why people who had never really thought about getting into a MMORPG are suddenly signing up to play. Did you expect *Halo 2* to rock? So did everyone else, that's why people queued up to buy it as seen in the photos in last issue's lead news. People go with what and who they know.

The **Edge** trip to AGDC 2004 unveiled a lot about not only what's going on here in Australian development, but more to the point, what needs to go on here for our creative teams to ensure we're going to stay on the gaming map.



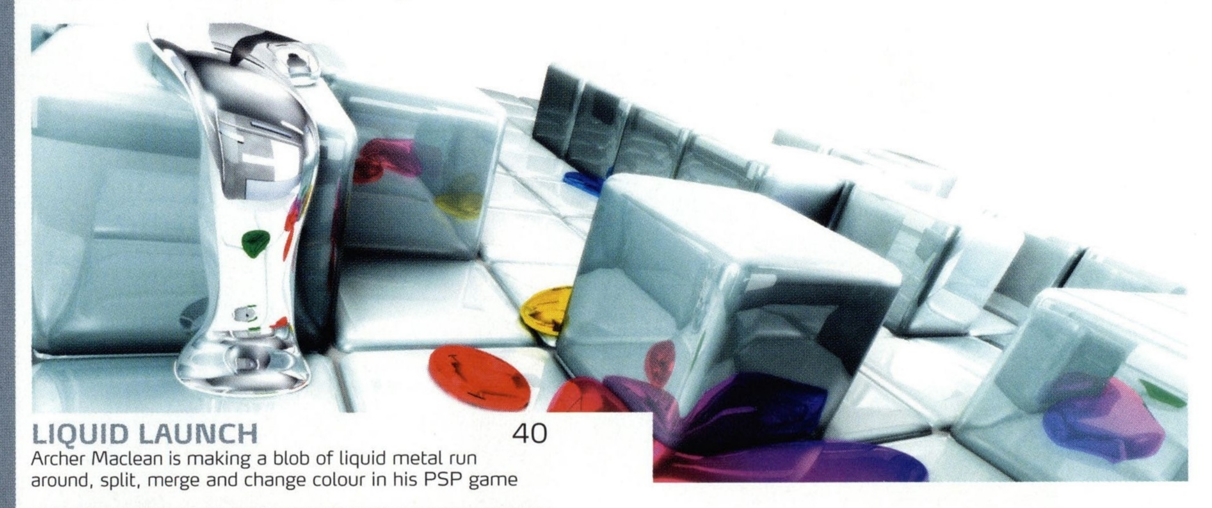
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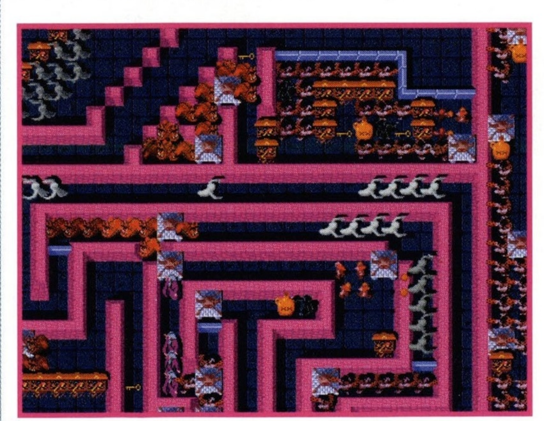












## Every month




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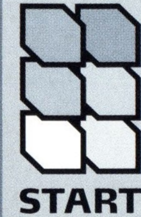



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## Hype



## Review



## START














Valve Software Design Manager Robin Walker on Half-Life 2's design secrets




SCEE giving two young AIE students their first real break into the games industry









One third of the 750 attendees at AGDC 2004 were students, most of whom were enrolled at the Academy of Interactive Entertainment (AIE). More on Australia's game development education institutions in a future issue.

Above: Discerning eyes steadily locked on the works of student devolpment projects, close to where New Zealand based developers Binary Star set up shop to impress the AGDC collective
Below: VR headset development is looking up at AGDC 2004. The A-Rage prototype gave professionals and prospective developers a 'hands on' demonstation.



EVENT

# AGDC 2004
# Conclave of the coders

**A growing Australian development community assembles for insights into the promising yet perilous future of the games industry**

Although Australia takes a back seat to the US and UK in terms of games developed and market share, the 2004 Australian Games Developer Conference gave the local community a lot to be happy about, as well as some issues to be concerned with.

Almost every aspect of game development was covered by a diverse assortment of local and international speakers with industry experience, in seminars and panel led discussions between December 2nd to 4th. Here many interested industry leaders and students from gaming institutions picked up valuable tips on developing dos and don'ts, right through to keynote insights into the likely short-term future of gaming.

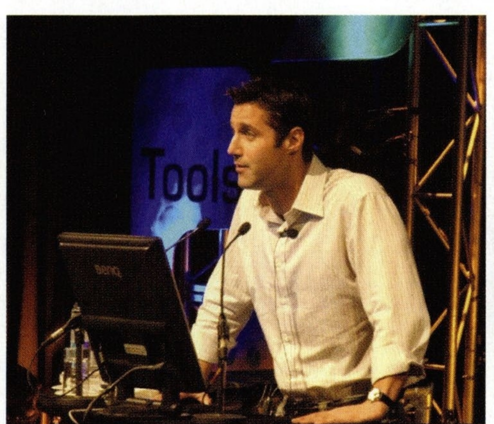
The other side of AGDC lies in the booth area where game developers, educational institutions, software developers (e.g. Discreet, makers of 3D Studio Max), VR and motion capture technologies, unsigned games and other industry factions made themselves available throughout the conference. All this, a MacOSX gaming room, a press room, parties, and a gala dinner closing awards ceremony made AGDC 2004 a very busy, but productive three days for the local development community.

The true crux of the state of play for game development came in the first keynotes from Jason Rubin, ex-President of US-based Naughty Dog, who put some healthy fear into all assembled. With a hugely successful career, particularly on Sony's platforms, Jason's adventure began at 16 when he co-founded Naughty Dog. Though many speakers at AGDC 2004 talked about increasing development costs, Rubin was the first.

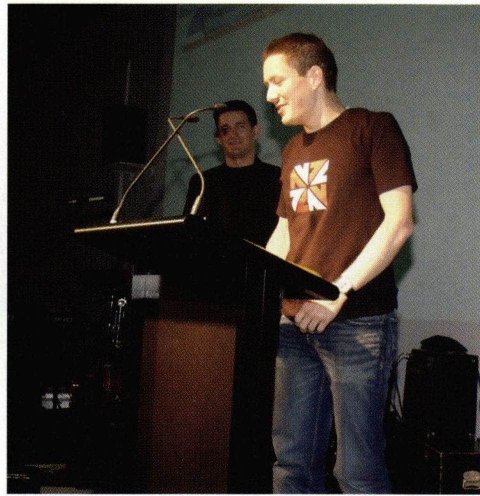
"Budgets are increasing by four to five times every console cycle," stated Rubin, soon grimly revealing, "I firmly believe that triple-A titles developed in the United States, the most expensive place in the world to develop, will cost US$30million in the next generation."

With that jump in costs not nearly being covered by the still massive 50% increase in market

Arguably the brightest moment of AGDC 2004, Thomas Reimann of Binary Star enthusiasticall accepts the awards fo Best New Start-Up and Best Unsigned Game (Professional)




The man with all the answers, International keynote speaker Jason Rubin (ex-President , Naught Dog Inc.) outlines Australia's place and possible future in games development





**"Every single publisher I spoke to immediate said that Australia is incredible with quality, reliability and smooth relations..."**

size expected, and the recent shift towards a market where a few titles sell very well, and many fail to break even, Rubin explained where Australian development presently has a great leverage point.

"I know there are companies in the US that are spending $8k per man, per month. Not many, but some. Most fall into $10-15k per man, per month. According to figures from publishers in the US who work with developers here, Australia comes in at around $6-8k."

Rubin then went on to begin citing information he collected from a collection of US based publishers before heading to AGDC, information that really summed up the state of play for Australian development.

"Reasons to expand into Australia, and here's the good news – every single publisher I spoke to immediately said that Australia is incredible with quality, reliability, value and smooth relations. Nobody had ANY complaints about Australia.

"They also say that you're 40% cheaper than US development and this is one of the reasons why Australia is expanding so quickly. You're undercutting the English-speaking western world right now."

Rubin had to break the bad news to Australia by pointing out the lack of Triple-A style development here that's caused by being too eager to please and versatile. He explained, "The work for hire approach seems to be working down here right now. There are a lot of licensed properties and a lot of outsourced work. It's the kind of work big American developers sometimes turn their nose up at," said Rubin before spelling out the issue at hand, "The problem is you don't want to get caught as China and everybody else picks up on that same market, and you can't compete against the cheapest long term, there's no way."

So what can Australia do? Rubin's advice was clear, "You need to think about moving away from it (work for hire) because you can't compete long term against the greater undercutters. Australian development needs to start thinking about where it's going, both on a group basis and on an individual basis"

It's not just Rubin's call; he echoed the words of two of the publishers he spoke to that declared, "Australian development is a great five year investment. This is both an amazing positive and an amazing negative, as it is effectively saying that "Right now China is not online, but eventually it will be. The five-year plan should be to move up the development ladder. You should be moving towards IP creation and away from licensed property manufacture – that's where you'll get pinched if you don't have the reputation or the ability to create your own material."

That's where Rubin left off, and the seminars began so that Australia's development talent could truly explore the best ways to go about creating better IP and better games. Countless speakers noted that creating strong IP is not cheap, and keynote speaker Martin S. Cooper of Team Bondi reminded our industry to look to entities with representatives at AGDC like the Victorian Government for financial assistance. France has already proven that enough government funding and support can turn a corner of the industry into a major international force.

The majority of the other seminars were predominantly technical in nature, covering art, sound, game design, platforms, programming and of course means to co-ordinate these elements of game development together. Employees from Krome, Irrational, Melbourne House, Micro Forte, Team Bondi, Tantalus, Pandemic, Blue Tongue

## AGDC Annual Industry Awards

**The winners for the 2004 awards were...**

Career Achievement - John De Margheriti (Micro Forte)
Outstanding Innovation - Andrew Bailey (Tantalus)
Best Game - Tribes Vengeance (Irrational)
Best PC Game - Tribes Vengeance (Irrational)
Best Console Game - Transformers (Melbourne House)
Best Handheld Game - Ty 2: Bush Rescue (Krome)
Best New Start-Up - Binary Star Limited
Best Original Char. Design - Ty 2: Bush Rescue (Krome)
Best Game Audio - Ty 2: Bush Rescue (Krome)
Best Game Design - Tribes Vengeance (Irrational)
Best Level Design - Tribes Vengeance (Irrational)
Outstanding Visual Arts - Ty 2: Bush Rescue (Krome)
Programming Excellence - Transformers (Melb. House)
Best Unsigned Game (Prof.) - Homeland (Binary Star)
Best Unsigned Game (Indie) - Scootarama (Primed Games)

The closing keynotes of AGDC 2004 was fielded by the panel of John De Margheriti (Micro Forte), Adam Lancman (Melbourne House), Bill Roper (Flagship Studios) and opening keynote speaker Jason Rubin. A lack of a consensus on the future of mobile gaming was the only true area of contention among the expert panel.





Above: Bill Roper, CEO Flagship Studios and industry legend
Below: John De Margheriti, AGDC founder and CEO of Micro Forte

and other companies shared their experiences and expertise with students of Australia's various educational institutions offering coursing in game development, plus of course, other developers.

With Half-Life 2 living up to the hype, Valve Software are unquestioningly one of the world's premiere development studios, so to have Design Manager Robin Walker back home in Australia to speak on the design and production strategies of Half-Life 2 did wonders to prove the point that Australians with the right skills, talent or experience can end up in the world's top studios.

Not all advice from the industry experts at AGDC 2004 was technical or financial in nature though. The second international keynote speaker was Flagship Studios CEO Bill Roper of Blizzard fame, sharing experiences on holding up morale through a game's development cycle. His informal approach and humorous delivery didn't cloud the point that games development is tough. With even the most prestigious studios feeling the pressure of meeting milestones, Roper pointed to the fact that poor people management can kill a good game.

AGDC also had other seminars with a social focus, such as the Women in Games session, where Kate Inabinet (3D Animator - Melbourne House) and Tess Snider (Imaginary Numbers) joined a panel facilitated by Cheryl Kiraly (AIE), dealing with the issues of the lack of women in the industry, as well as the relative lack of female-friendly games. Even for men too sexist or capitalistic to care about the social implications, sales figures on such titles, including the all conquering 'genderless' Sims games would suggest there's good reason to do so.

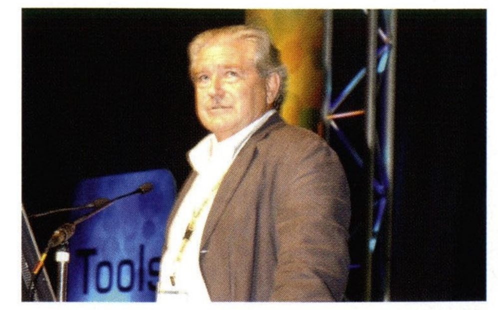
Inabinet reflected on the improvement in attitude within AGDC, stating, "As a woman attendee I have gone from being considered a novelty and asked to dress up as Lara Croft, to someone whose role is respected within the industry and is paneling a discussion confronting those very attitudes." Edge Australia will be following up with the Women in Games panel in coming issues, exploring the arduous path to the inevitable reality where gaming is no longer a 'guy thing' – the future of videogames.

The booth area was the place to see working demonstrations of game development technologies such as the A-Rage VR gaming system or the GypsyGyro motion capture suit (previously in E1) – the two truly tactile technologies there. On the software front there were both creative tools and creations. Micro Forte were on hand to back up their extremely impressive 'Using BigWorld to create a MMOG in 1 hour' seminar' in an effort to license their proprietary MMO engine technology to more clients, as were Discreet, the company behind 3D Studio Max – the industry's go-to graphics suite.

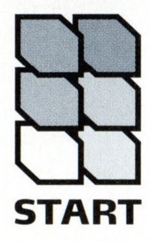
This corner of the conference also saw the next generation of developers putting forth their creative works as well. Sony Computer Entertainment Australia continued their tradition of offering scholarships to gifted students, while unsigned titles from both students and professionals impressed all attendees; particularly Auckland based Binary Star and their sci-fi FPS 'Homeland

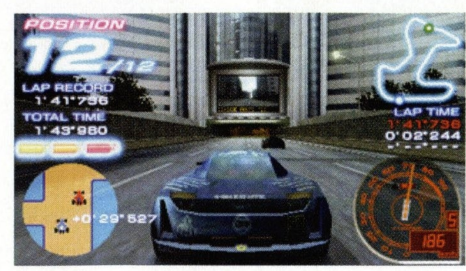
The only real shame about AGDC 2004 was that only a handful of the students from the various educational institutions got to see Thomas Reimann of the aforementioned Binary Star receive the awards for Best Unsigned Game and Best Start-up Developer. His unabashed excitement over receiving the much-deserved recognition was an absolute joy to behold – and served as the most profound evidence of how this conference can genuinely make a difference for anyone trying to make a break in gaming in this part of the world.

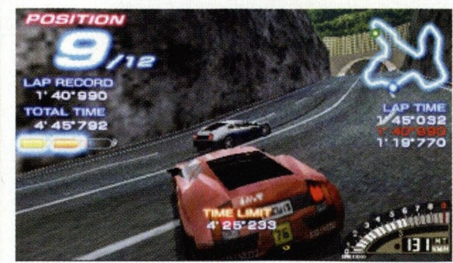
Jason Rubin's keynotes laid everything out on the table for the Australian industry to consider. Over the next twelve months, Edge will be looking to see how good a job our developers are doing at stretching that "five-year investment" into an unending happy story.

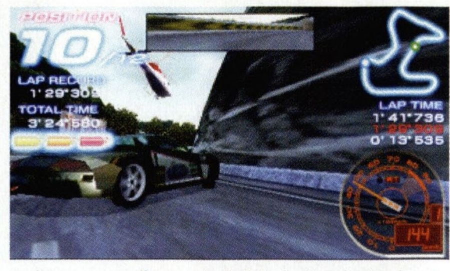


Martin S. Cooper of Team Bondi outlined four financial models for development teams to adopt, noting pros and cons of each.




24 tracks will feature in *Ridge Racers*, including favourites from *R4*, *RRV* and *Rage Racer;* also returning is race queen Reiko Nagase. The car line-up seems all-new, as is the introduction of a nitro boost

After some doubt, the PSP *Sangoku Musou* title has been confirmed for launch day. Both Sony and Koei will be hoping for the bite-sized edition to continue the PS2 version's sales streak

PSP™










Snake returns to handheld fashionably late, with a December 16 release – Konami's only launch day title is one of the fistful of PSP mahjongg games, the less-exciting-than-it-sounds *Mahjongg Fight*






HARDWARE

# Sony PSP launches in Japan

## Surprisingly low price point for glossy handheld



In their publicity drive behind the PSP, Sony has made it clear that the firm is not just selling a games machine – it's selling a mystique. Details of the pricing, launch date and software range of the new hand-held have been kept deliberately discrete, so that imagination and hype can fill in the blanks in the public consciousness. But time marches on, and the instant success of the Nintendo DS has forced Sony's hand. As it turned out, the machine really did make it to Japanese consumers before the New Year, going on sale December 12. More surprising was the price: ¥19,800 ($247) or ¥20,790 ($260) after tax.

This is far lower than most industry experts were expecting. With such solid build quality, tremendous processing power and the loveliest screen ever to grace a hand-held, it would seem that this launch is being pushed as a loss-leader. That is, Sony appears willing to lose money on the hardware if it means enough people buy it to make the software side profitable. This gesture may prove premature, given only 200,000 units went on sale at launch, with 500,000 in total by the end of 2004. Nintendo has managed four times that number, reaping sales from the lucrative American market from day one.

**Release details for the US, Europe and Australasia were not forthcoming at the time of writing but the PSP looks to be on track for a launch in western terrirories by Autumn 2005**

So what are early-adopting Japanese getting for their money? Just under ¥21,000 gets them a battery pack, a universal (100-240v) AC adaptor, and of course the PSP console itself. Since that magic mirror of a screen is utterly unprotected, a protective clamshell case is available for ¥2,100 ($27). If that sounds too complex an arrangement, the Value Pack sells for a slightly higher ¥26,040 after tax ($326), and includes console, battery adaptor, and carry case, as well as a 32Mb Memory Stick Duo, headphones, and a handy wrist strap. It would seem that Sony has decided the PSP doesn't need a pack-in game; leave that to 'demanding' Nintendo fans to actually want to play something straight out the box.

Release details for the US, Europe and Australasia were not forthcoming as of this writing, but the PSP looks to be on track for a launch in western territories by the Autumn of 2005.

Software details are equally sketchy. Confirmed as titles available during the "launch window" were *Armored Core Formula Front*, *Puzzle Bobble Pocket*, and *Ridge Racers*, with a total of 21 in Japan before the end of the year. The release schedule through 2005 and 2006 is still veiled in speculation, with established franchises and bold new experimental titles expected to arrive from all quarters.

Still, consumers love a bit of mystery with a new console. A limited software line-up at launch is almost worn as a badge of honour by loyalists to any given game company. But one thing that is unforgivable in any hand-held device is a short battery life. The party line states that the PSP will last 4-6 hours on a full charge for gaming, and 4-5 hours for movie playback. Those higher numbers assume you turn down the volume and screen brightness, and keep wireless activity to a minimum. Power consumption will vary from one software title to the next, and the onus has been placed on developers to make the most frugal use of the PSPs resources. Particularly graphics-intensive titles (*Tekken*, et al) may last as little 2 hours, so it's fortunate that battery packs are easily changeable.

Sony Computer Entertainment platform design big-wig Ken Kutaragi has commented in a disingenuous fashion that the original Sony Walkman, when first released, only had two hours of battery life. Any lucid observer to this statement would note that the PSP is hardly the first device of its kind on the market.

Perhaps the most telling factor in this whirlwind of publicity is that Sony has created a hip market image as the PSPs most important factor, and the details of cost, software range and battery life have been coloured in within these lines. The hipsters surrounding this article show remarkable similarity to the first spokes-models of the N-Gage, and that hasn't exactly been a runaway success for Nokia. This marketing strategy is diametrically opposed to the one Nintendo is adopting for the DS; while it's clear that both systems can co-exist, it's less obvious whether both will survive, or if there will be much of a crossover with their audiences.

Time will tell for the PSP, and that time is coming soon.



### Game releases

**The 21 'launch window' titles, with dates where announced**

- **AI Series Go** (Marvelous Interactive, TBC)
- **AI Series Mahjongg** (Marvelous Interactive, TBC)
- **AI Series Shogi** (Marvelous Interactive, TBC)
- **Armored Core Formula Front** (From Software, Out)
- **Dokodemo Issyo** (SCEJ, Out)
- **Gagharv Trilogy** (Bandai, TBC)
- **Kollon** (Cyber Front, TBC)
- **Lumines** (Bandai, TBC)
- **Mahjongg Taikai** (Koei, TBC)
- **Mahjongg Fight Club** (Konami Out)
- **Metal Gear Acid** (Konami, Out)
- **Minna No Golf Portable** (SCEJ, Out)
- **Mojipittan** (Namco, Out)
- **Need For Speed Underground Rivals** (EA, TBC)
- **Puyo Puyo Fever** (Sega, Out)
- **Puzzle Bobble Pocket** (Taito, TBC)
- **Rengoku: The Tower of Purgatory** (Hudson, Out)
- **Ridge Racers** (Namco, Out)
- **Shin Sangoku Musou** (Koei, Out)
- **Tiger Woods PGA Tour** (EA, TBC)
- **Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower** (Capcom, Out)



### Accessory prices

**Because there's more to PSP than just the console**

- **Secondary battery: ¥5,040 ($64)**
- **Secondary AC Adaptor: ¥3,675 ($47)**
- **Memory Stick Duo (32Mb): ¥2,940 ($37)**
- **Headphones + remote control: ¥2,940 ($37)**
- **Carrying case + wrist strap: ¥2,100 ($27)**



EVENT

# Touch! DS tour

## Nintendo reaches out and gets touched at Osaka Technoport

By now, the Nintendo DS will have launched in the US, but the DS Touch! tour in Japan offered insights into the way the system is presently being received relative to the competition. The travelling DS roadshow wasn't strictly created to illustrate the distinction between the DS and the PSP, but it's hard not to compare the mood of the Touch! DS Osaka stop with Sony's PSP promotional still life (see page 12). It wasn't so much the DS hardware or software that was on show, but the audience's reaction to it, as they queued to milk cows on *Harvest Moon*, blow into the microphone with *XX/XY Feel The Magic*, or play *Mario 64* for the first time again, linked up and laughing.

Many attendees came as complete families but there was just as large a presence of trend-following teenagers and contemplative middle-aged salarymen, all prepared to stand for 30 minutes in line for demo pods. *Pictochat* drew droves: both to play and to simply sit and watch the stage presentation, where comperes in oversized bow-ties held a Nintendo quiz for the fastest to draw and send a correct answer. Later, DS units were smuggled into the packed seating area to allow the pod-users to wirelessly communicate with strangers, the resulting correspondences broadcast on the big screen to the delight of all.

Throughout the show, no member of the audience was safe from participation: wandering groups of event staff wearing enormous speakers were demonstrating *Jam With The Band* in impromptu sessions. While our alto sax on Smoke On The Water got off to a bad start, much to our bandmates' amusement, they were cheering us on by our considerably improved final solo. An aspect highlighted by the thrust-in-our-hands nature of the experience was the impressive durability of the DS screens, unscathed by hundreds of fingers and styli.

If the DS industry showings were the theory, Touch! DS was the practice, answering the initial scepticism over the communication element with the assurance of a company that absolutely understands its core market, and arguably, other markets it previously did not grasp.

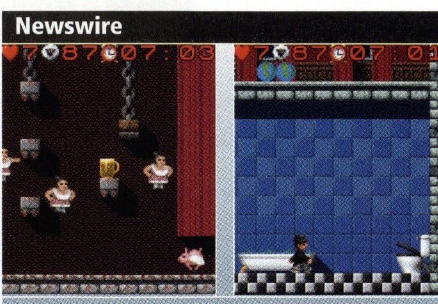
**No member of the audience was safe from participation: wandering groups of event staff wearing speakers were demonstrating Jam With The Band in impromptu sessions**




**Firstparty titles like *Yoshi's Touch & Go* are intuitive enough to make instructions redundant; but Namco's *Pac-Pix* confused some**

It was the DS' show, but the GBA and Cube were also represented, with a much improved *StarFox Assault* one of the non-DS highlights. Another was a (female) cosplay Link (above)

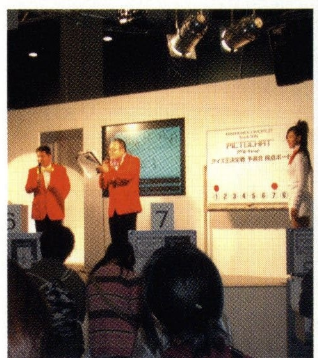
## Newswire



### Where's Willy? Here's Willy

**Following Edge's tireless campaigning (read: we ran a story here last month), the mobile version of *Jet Set Willy* has been released from development hell and should be available from exclusive distributor Advanced Mobile Solutions now. The conversion, undertaken by handheld specialist www.numfum.com, is compatible with new 3G phones including the SE V800, 902SH, E1000, V980 and 6630, and follows the exacting platforming format of the revered Matthew Smith original from 1984. Whether the completeness of the port means that the attic bug has been retained remains unknown at the time of going to press.**

**_Ganbare Goemon_ (right) was playable, and had lost none of the SNES title's charm. In fact, it's gained an even more mischievous sense of humour – it's possible to interact with levels using the touchscreen, such as pulling down rockfaces with the stylus, and this pad-and-touch play feels natural enough**



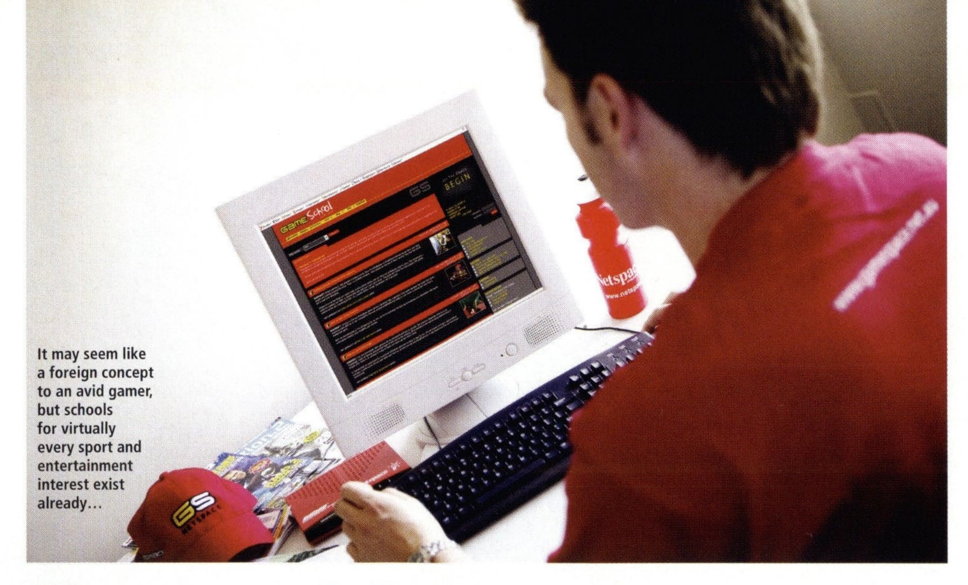










It may seem like a foreign concept to an avid gamer, but schools for virtually every sport and entertainment interest exist already...

# Open wide... Come inside...

Potential online gamers have a new service on offer to hold their hand - It's Gameschool, and it's a world first.

Grizzled gaming veterans take certain basic skills for granted, but to a beginner the world of online gaming can be intimidating. Local ISP Netspace has seen this as an opportunity, a chance to provide a unique service: that first leg up into gaming. Held in small classes of up to 12 students, Gameschool teaches vital survival and etiquette skills via classes in UT 2004 and Half-Life Rally. This school of the air is in session over text and voice chat, with alumni able to hold their own in the ruthless online world. According to project manager **Ben Dunscombe**, this is a first for Australia, and probably the wold. It's also free. "Gamespace and Gameschool aren't revenue generating in a direct fashion. It's a bit like any other feature set we'd offer with our service." It's not restricted to subscribers, but apparently this is a good thing.

"We believe that the inherent benefits of this kind of thing is that though things like Gamespace, and Gameschool, we will attract users to Netspace. We've done this as a commercial activity because we believe there are people out there will join us because of our activities in this area."

Those who sign up with Netspace don't have to worry about the service sapping their download limits, and low pings are another benefit.

"It's more or less a fixed cost for us. We've invested over a period of 12 months around $500,000. We see that capital as the sum cost. There's not a direct relationship between number of users and revenue."

It sounds like a lot of money, especially compared to the industry standard.

"This is a very calculated move. The one thing that game services have always been starved of is capital – most are run quite literally on the smell of an oily rag."

When discussing the need for such a service in Australia, Dunscombe is equally blunt about the state of play.

"Online gaming in Australia tends to be an amateurish activity. That's not to pour disdain on those out there at the moment, but they tend to rely on the best efforts of volunteers."

Not only could it bring in a new reign of professionalism to Australian gaming, but Gameschool could finally begin to snare those mythological untapped markets: women and older gamers.

"There are people out there playing games that don't connect to the internet. Computer games have been around as long as I can remember. This isn't a new, budding section of the community."

**"Gamespace and Gameschool aren't revenue generating in a direct fashion, It's a bit like any other feature we'd set up with our service."**

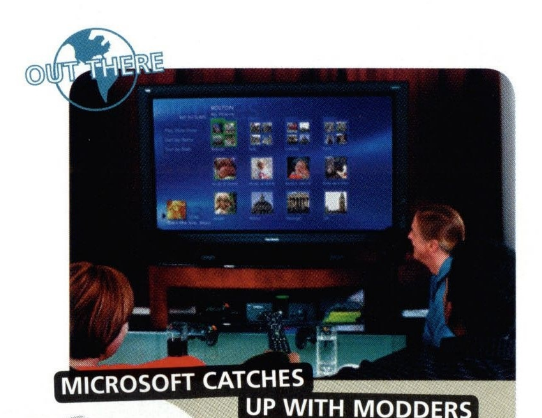
Ultimately, Dunscombe sees services like Gameschool instructing punters in a broader set of skills: browsing, searching, and shopping online.

"There's a whole section of the community out there that has a certain reticence about modern technology. If we can touch those people... if we can go out and provide an education for people, we're creating a customer base."

Of course, some game coaching and a certain breed of social priming won't have any chance of removing the offputting elements of online gaming, such as players that cheat, abusive players, or of course, the most frustrating side-effect of net gaming, lag.

But if gaming standards are to rise, and for what is still a niche market to earn a broader appeal, someone has to make an effort. In a year's time services like Gameschool may be just another part of the landscape, but one company has to be the first to take the plunge. The cost is enormous, but reward could be incalculable..

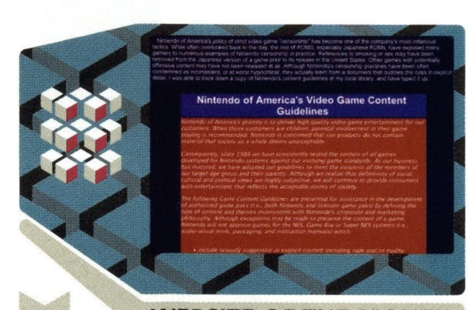
OUT THERE



## MICROSOFT CATCHES UP WITH MODDERS

It's only taken them a couple of years, but it looks like Microsoft has finally produced something for a (retail, non-modified) Xbox to rival the chipped machine's Xbox Media Center. The Media Center Extender (see prototype, left) uses an infrared receiver to talk to a PC running Windows Media Center, and allows access to all that PC's media on the Xbox. Which means, finally, those uninterested in ruining their warranty and playing Russian roulette with a soldering iron can experience what everyone else has been raving about for a while. The unit, retailing at just under US$80 ($100), should be out in the US by the time you read this.

• www.microsoft.com




## WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Did you know that Nintendo of America routinely replaces red-cross health logos in its videogames with unchristian hearts? Or that any references to beer in Japanese Nintendo games are changed to 'pop' for their western release? Well, you do now, and you'll know plenty more if you visit this site. Actually, it's not so much a website as an extended, single-page essay on NOA's often-decried censorship policies, but it's more than fascinating enough to warrant a mention here. Plus there's a screenshot of Bowser making an offensive hand gesture. What's not to like?

Site: Nintendo censorship
URL: www.filibustercartoons.com/Nintendo.php






The things people say about videogames

**"Nintendo's customers – including many children and their parents – have come to identify the Nintendo trademark(s)/works with the high quality of Nintendo products. Your unauthorised use of the Nintendo trademark(s)/works will tarnish Nintendo's reputation."**
Nintendo's legal response to a user's profile on porn site suicidegirls.com that listed *Zelda* and *Metroid* as their favourite games.

"The defective Xboxes stop working after minimal usage, after unreasonably, unconscionably, unusually and unexpectedly short amounts of time"
More legal shenanigans, this time from Xbox owner Sean Burke, suing Microsoft after his console stopped working after a month. Class action ahoy…

"Virtual worlds are being designed by know-nothing newbies, and there's not a damned thing anyone can do about it. I don't mean newbie designers, I mean newbie players – first timers. They're dictating design through a twisted 'survival of the not-quite-fittest' form of natural selection that will lead to a long-term decay in quality, guaranteed."
Richard Bartle, co-creator of *MUD*, rails against modern-day MMORPGS.

**"*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is very violent [and includes] shooting cops. People like being the bad guy. This is a way of acting out a stupid fantasy… *Halo 2* is every bit as violent, but the things that you are shooting don't look like people. They look like space suit guys."**
Wedbush Morgan Securities analyst Michael Pachter explains game violence to Reuters

INTERVIEW

# Rome wasn't built in a day

## Mike Simpson, development director of The Creative Assembly's UK team, talks Total War

**What happened the day *Rome: Total War* went gold? Was there a flurry of champagne corks, or did everyone drag themselves home to bed?**
For most of the team the last day was mostly spent waiting. We were fixing the last few issues, making a build and testing it. Most people ended up just playing the game all day. We went round that loop a few times, but by late afternoon we were done. There's then a quite long process to go through to get the build out the door. All the variant builds have to be compiled – unprotected, Safedisk and dongled (for the localisers). They're then zipped up, checked, copied, checked, burned on to DVD, unzipped, tested, and finally sent on their way to the publisher. There's not really anything for the team to do during this period. We can't go home in case anything goes wrong and we have to go round the loop again (which happened several times). So, as the evening wore on we played the game some, and people gradually drifted away, until about half a dozen were left. We spent the last six hours playing *Mashed* on the PS2, finally crawling home at about four in the morning.

**"I can't tell you how good it feels to emerge from the trenches into the dazzling light of unrestrained adoration from thousands upon thousands of raving fans"**

Rome's development started soon after *Medieval* was completed, running in parallel with expansions for the latter. This long timeframe explains its highly impressive engine

**What was the very last thing to be fixed? Was there anything which had to be abandoned or removed at the last minute?**
The last thing we fixed was a bug in the assassins, where they could end up trying to kill a guy who had just died of old age. It took a few attempts (and loops round the build process) to fix the unexpected consequences of the fixes. We did give up on one last fix we intended to make – the game writes out log files tracking stats on traits and advice, and we intended to turn them off, but they refused to go, and by 2am we gave up. No harm done.

**What did the team do on the day the game hits the shops? Did anyone go around re-arranging shelves to make sure *Rome* was at the front?**
We had a good look around the shops. I was on holiday, so I went round EB, Virgin, and Best Buy in Miami, checking that the Activision marketing machine was doing its job in the US, that copies were available and all the POS was in place. We didn't have to re-arrange the shelves – as *Rome* was already at the front. They had done a great job.

**How does the team feel about reviews? Are they anxiously awaited or are they completely ignored?**
Review scores are posted on our newsgroups as they come in, often along with the reviews. We pay a lot of attention to gamerankings.com – a great site that tracks all the reviews every game gets, works out an average score, and then ranks the games. After 60 or so reviews *Rome* averages 92.8 per cent, making it the best PC strategy game ever written (apart from *Starcraft: Brood Wars*, which I don't count because it's an add-on and only has 12 reviews). It also makes it the seventh best PC game of all time. So, we do really care about all the reviews, probably worrying more about our gamerankings position than we do about sales. We'd been waiting with baited breath for some time to hear **Edge**'s verdict – and were really pleased that you gave it such a high score.



Mike Simpson started out writing Spectrum games and has been with Creative from the beginning, working on all the *Total War* projects to date



We do get very upset when we get an unfair review. *Rome* has only had one – GameInformer – the biggest multiformat mag in the US. They gave it 77 per cent when all the other reviews were over 90 per cent. It wouldn't have been so bad if the review had picked on the weakest parts of the game. We have our list of the things we know can be made even better for the next game, and their gripes just weren't on it. Without that review our average would be 93 per cent, and that hurts even more than the fact they've told all their subscribers not to bother buying *Rome*. It's not fair, but there's nothing we can do except break out the voodoo dolls and order some more chickens.

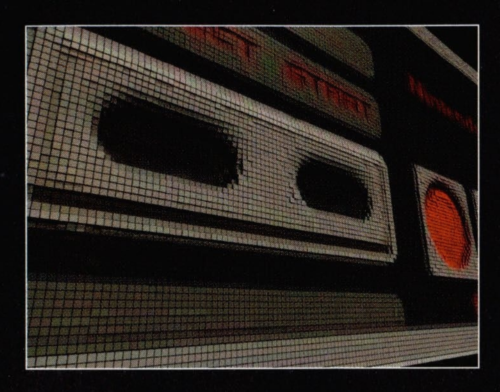
**How has the reception been for players so far? Have they picked up on anything you didn't foresee? Have they made the game do anything you didn't know it could do?**
The response has been overwhelming. We've been working so hard for the last nine months we didn't have the time to sit back and look at what we'd done. I can't tell you how good it feels to emerge from the trenches into the dazzling light of unrestrained adoration from thousands upon thousands of raving fans. The hardcore fans do dig deep, and come up with some very insightful comments. Usually, we're aware of the issues, but it does help us develop a consensus view on the way to deal with them. The modders are already deep into the guts of the game figuring out how to change it. The most surprising thing they've done so far is to make the wonders of the world – things like the pyramids – appear in the distance when you fight a battle nearby. I've no idea how they did that.

**What proportion of the team stays working on the game after it's released?**
There is a gradual transition from working on patches and updates in to working on the next thing. We don't just forget about it once it's in the box. We listen to the feedback on the forums, and tweak, fix and polish the game ready to issue a new patch. Having half a million people playing the game inevitably finds things that can be improved, and multiplayer is one area we'll keep working on all the way to the next release. At this point about 20 (out of an overall team of 77) people are spending some or all of their time working on the patch.

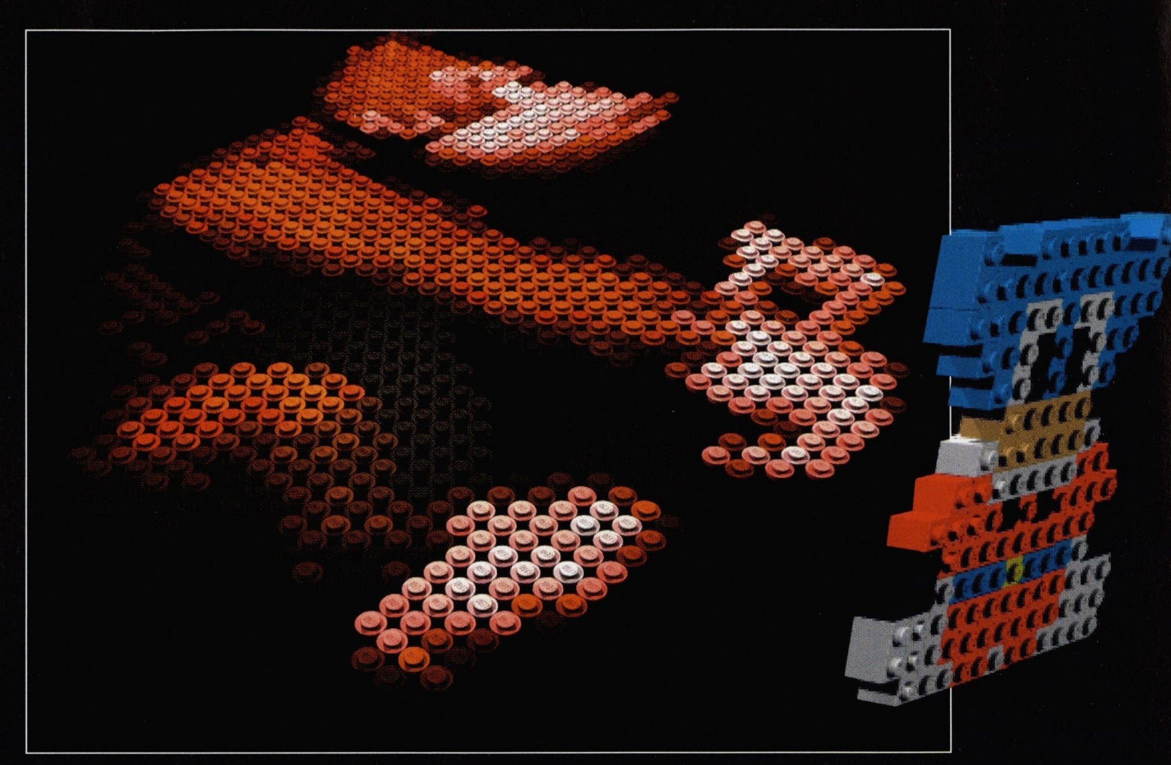
**How does The Creative Assembly manage the transition from one project to the next?**
When we finished *Shogun* we started two new projects in parallel. *Medieval* was an ambitious evolution of the *Shogun* technology and codebase, and was a two-year project. *Rome* was a revolution – new core technology, fresh and clean codebase and a four-year project. The aim was to make sure that we are the ones who make the game that blows away the previous one, and the competition doesn't ever overtake us. Combine that with add-ons and we get a release every year and a head start on a technology curve that is so steep no one else can catch us.

**How important for the success of the studio is this policy? Is the idea of 'one game, one team' viable anymore?**
Sure, 'one game, one team' works once, or even twice, but if you just keep churning out the same game with different content your market lead gradually bleeds away and you eventually get left terminally behind – like the *C&C* series.

**What's next for The Creative Assembly?**
We have a huge list of things we'd like to do in future *Total War* strategy games. Some of these are new technologies, some are new mechanics for gameplay, and some are whole new areas we haven't included in the games so far. Our aim is to make the 'perfect' strategy game that everyone will enjoy. Then comes the next revolutionary design, where the aim is to astound everyone by doing things which are clearly impossible. Like every developer we also have our secret project that we're not talking about yet – but I'm not going to talk about that yet.





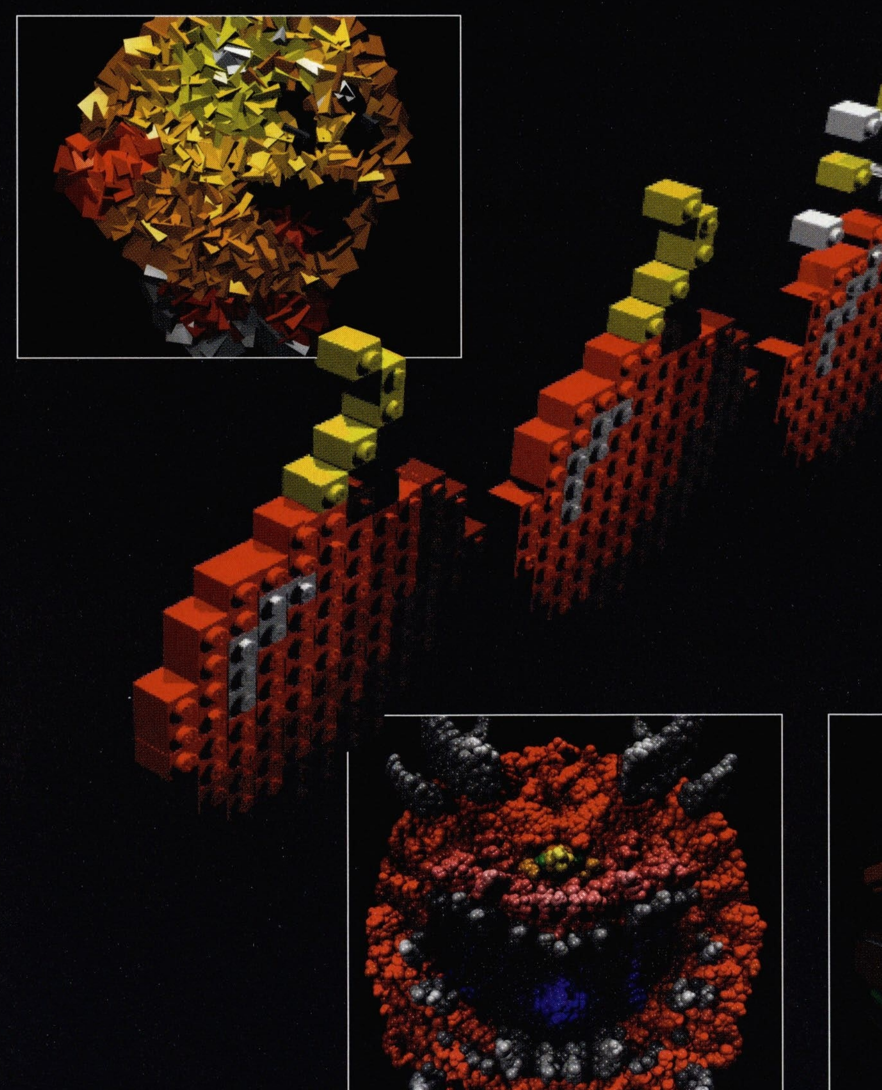


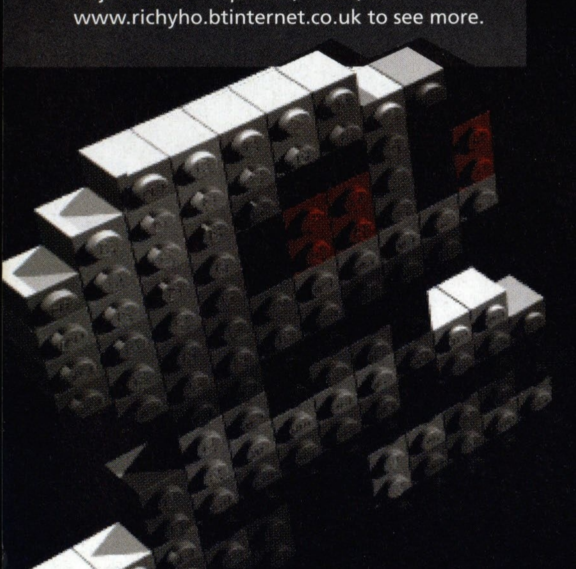
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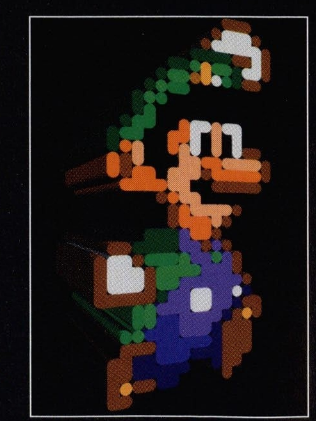
# But it is art (continued)

## Legends from gaming's past get captivating 3D overhaul

The images on this page may be iconic, but you may need to focus a little harder in order to appreciate that you've never seen them looking quite like this. That's because they're the work of artist **Richard Horsman**, who uses his own software to "drag the 2D source images kicking and screaming into the third dimension with the original pixels being replaced by combinations of primitive objects such as spheres, cubes, etc." Visit www.richyho.btinternet.co.uk to see more.











YOU CAN ALSO

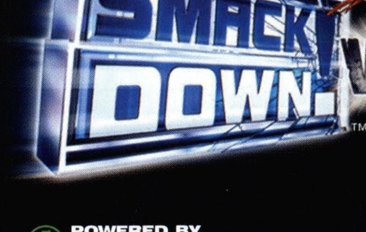
PLAY THE MALE

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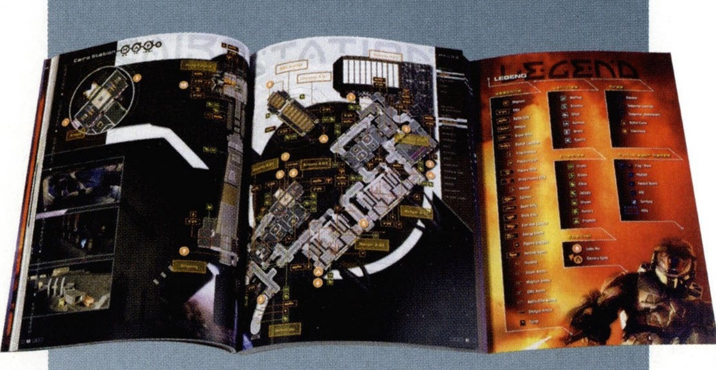


www.thq.com

INTERVIEW

# Halo 2 brought to book

**Piggyback Interactive has spent the last four months inside Bungie, preparing the official guide. Founder Victor Pargney explains the process**



Bungie was so heavily involved with the guide project that it hired a designer specifically to produce all the maps for the guide in 3ds Max, ensuring their accuracy, as well as incorporating the Piggyback team into its studios at Redmond

**How tight was security around *Halo 2*?**
Once the guide left the printing press, our 'no spoiler' guarantee meant we needed to take additional precautions, so the guide was shipped under specially coded, non-*Halo 2* branded boxes for added security.

**The game was still in development while you were there. Were there a lot of changes while you were writing the guide?**
Developing the guide was like trying to take a close range photo of a train travelling at 320 kmph. In the early stages the game was incomplete, which meant the guide evolved with the game. During the last seven weeks of game development, the rate of change was phenomenal. We received our daily code updates, and there was always so much more to capture. But we matched Bungie's pace and the guide reflects all the changes in the game.

**The first *Halo* was exceptional. Did you get a sense of what it is about Bungie that enabled it to achieve what so few teams can?**
Mostly, what stood out was their amazing capacity to project manage the game combined with a unified vision of what they wanted to achieve. And when they weren't working on *Halo 2*, they were playing *Halo 2*.

**Was it a hard game to write a guide for? After all, there isn't much in the way of secrets, it's pretty linear, and uses the same core skills throughout the game.**
The game really exceeded our expectations in terms of complexity – the game areas are vast and there are so many modes to write for. The multiplayer experience could be a standalone book in its own right. For us to create the gamer's bible for a title it's inevitable for it to consume around 10,000 man-hours, but having to do it in just four months meant the team worked 18 hour days.

**Were you sick of the sight of it by the end?**
No, we're all mad about the game – really. When it's released, our guys will lose themselves in the *Halo 2* world for countless more nights and weekends. It's a tough job…



## Newswire



### Half-Life 2 gets extra life

Given the love/hate relationship Japan has with the firstperson shooter – mostly it hates them, but some days it really loves to hate them – it seems a little peculiar that Taito has announced it's making a *Half-Life 2* arcade machine. Still, this doesn't look like a half-arsed sop to the (minimal) western market. Using a dedicated pod with widescreen display and 5.1 channel sound, and compatible with the Net Entry System for country-wide co-operative combat, it looks like PC and arcade gaming may no longer be separate circles on the great Venn diagram of videogames. And more intersection titles are on the way: since Taito's Type X arcade board is essentially a modified PC running an embedded version of Windows XP, ports (theoretically) should come quick and easy – indeed, a version of *Unreal Tournament* has also been announced.

The release date for *Half-Life 2*'s arcade cousin is down as summer 2005, but given Valve's record of procrastination, expect the east to go motion-sickness crazy sometime in late 2007.

## AT A STORE NEAR YOU

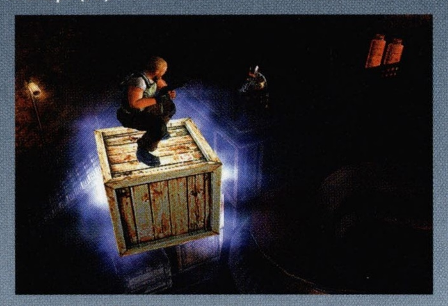
Games hitting the shelves this month

**Second Sight (PC)** — E 1, 7/10 (Xbox version)



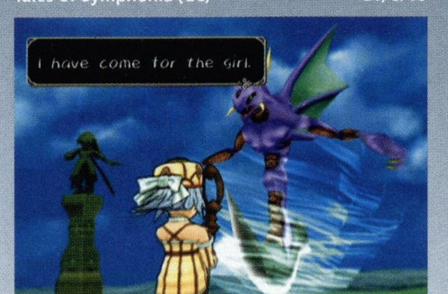
"Despite its irritations and its occasionally threadbare set-dressing, this is a smart, fun, forward thinking work… a true British original"

**Psi Ops (PC)**



"A rock-solid thirdperson blaster at heart. Intelligently calibrated, it is as imaginative as it is competent and as considerate as it is demanding"

**Tales of Symphonia (GC)** — E1, 8/10

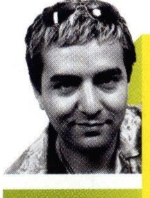



*Tales Of Symphonia*'s action-based combat is "a satisfying and often stunning spectacle, and one which still reveals subtleties hours into the game"

**Final Fantasy I&II (GBA)**




After the wait for *FFXI*, the wait for *FFXII* seems to stretch out even further. This GBA re-jig dusts off the originals and might well help tide you over



DEVELOPER DIARY

## Tameem Antoniades, now of Ninja Theory, continues his next-gen story...

Last month I covered the first three months of 2003 and why we started a next-gen game a year or more before most developers would even consider doing this and several years before we imagined next-gen kits would even appear. Going next-gen has some pretty big implications on a company's strategy. It can change everything!

For one, the complete rejection of any game that could be considered 'cartoony' will only get stronger. Thinking back to all previous gaming breakthroughs, the drive towards realism and immersion has always led the way even if purists of the time sometimes dislike it. Once again, the purists will be driven out of the games industry as punters and publishers vote with their wallets.

So we started thinking about style in terms of cinematography, costume and set design, action choreography, dynamic camera direction and performance rather than character proportions and rendering tricks.

I'd like to think that the next-gen game experience should not be about any single gameplay, rendering or hardware gimmick. Nor should it be about pigeonhole genres. I believe that the next-gen will kick-start the rise of games as a sophisticated entertainment medium as powerful as film, music and literature: the tenth art. There, I said it.

Achieving this goal wasn't going to be cheap, quick or easy, so we immediately abandoned our plans to become a two-game studio. In a hit-driven business all efforts must focus on creating hits, so diluting our focus across multiple teams is not going to work.

**We started thinking about style in terms of cinematography, costume, set design, choreography, dynamic camera direction and performance rather than character proportions**

Creatively, we looked beyond Blade Runner-wannabes, Tolkien-wannabes, sports, racing or war games. A basic principle of market positioning is to not go head-to-head against the heavyweights: gangster games belong to *GTA*, sports belong to EA and colas belong to Coca-Cola. The odds are overwhelmingly stacked against you should you try and take them on. All of these products were once pioneers going against the grain and that's why they are dominant now.

I think that to stand a good chance of success, you need three things: a great game, a great mind-share position and the hype of the gods. So what better time than at the start of an exciting new console generation to position yourself with a statement of style and beauty? And to start early enough to craft an amazing gaming experience that truly could not exist on current-gen hardware? If we pull this off, the hype will sort itself out.

However, trying to create something new with a publisher's money can have serious consequences. It's not uncommon for games to be pigeon-holed into a single, narrow genre since sales estimates are made easy within these constraints. It is also not uncommon for developers to work under such severe financial or time constraints that they are destined to release sub-par games despite their best efforts and intentions. When these games are released against the heavyweights, really bad things happen.

These are a couple of the myriad reasons why gamers feel they are spoon-fed the same old turd time after time.

As an ambitious independent we want to try something different, something we think will be more successful but we rely on publisher funding. Finding a level of mutual trust and respect with a publishing partner is the only way the developer-publisher relationship can work for the good of both parties and for gamers. To find the right publisher, we first have a lot to prove. So with a team of 22 we got to work. By the summer of 2003, we had some nice tech demos, a full design, a great trailer to back it up and a business plan. Check the movie out at our website: www.justaddmonsters.com/edge

Am I worried that someone will 'steal' our ideas through this kind of article? Not at all. They tried that once when Nina, Mike and I were working from a bedroom pitching *Kung Fu Chaos* to a certain publisher. They asked if it would work with a certain licence. We said 'yes', but we didn't want to do that. They were given the entire design for evaluation. They went off, slapped their licence onto it, farmed it out to a developer and released a turkey. You can't steal good execution, so we might as well share what worked and didn't for us, at a time where so many developers will face the same issues, right?

Turning a bold vision into reality and repositioning a company around this was always going to be tough but I could never have imagined just how soul-sapping and painful the next few months would be...



On a current PC, Ninja Theory's engine can cope with up to 1,000 characters, all with shadowing and unique animations, collision detection and AI. Top: the currently nameless female character

**While putting this article together, all of Argonaut's subsidiaries were forced into administration – including JAM. It looked like the end of the road for us but together with Jez's backing, Nina, Mike and I managed to rescue the business.**

**So we are now the a new independent company, run by its original founders with fresh capital and fresh hope. The new company is called Ninja Theory. Why? Because Ninjas Make Better Games. FACT.**



## Internet Game Of The Month
### Maple Story

www.mapleglobal.com

**There's never been a better time to play an MMO, which means there's never been a worse time. What to pick? Stay loyal to *EverQuest 2* or jump ship to *World Of WarCraft*? What are your friends playing? Nothing. They're dithering just as much as you are, hoping you'll pick first. It's time to break the cycle. *Maple Story* shouldn't really be on this page, since it's not a finished game (it's still in beta) and it's not really an internet game, since it needs a download (though *WoW* beta testers will consider that a modern hazard). But what it is, is a delightful, lightweight 2D MMORPG. Simple combat, entertaining quests, beautiful environments and cute accessories make it an appealing alternative to reality. Already running full steam ahead in Japan, China and Korea, the game is entirely free, sustaining itself through an in-game shop where the choicest kit can be bought for cash. Once it gets into full swing for the rest of the world, it should offer the perfect antidote for anyone who likes their online crusades to be mini rather than massive.**




## N-GAGE GETS SLIGHTLY LESS EMBARRASSING

While the original N-Gage seems destined to become a comedy footnote in handheld gaming history, there are still thousands of them out there, and consequently there are thousands of people getting somewhat annoyed at the ludicrous lengths you have to go to to change games. Stress no more: modding expert mashmods.com has come up with a homebrew solution. Essentially comprising an SD card connector glued to the back of the case, the device negates the need to remove the battery every time you want to change your game, as well as enabling hot-swapping – the ability to switch games without turning off the device. Find out how at www.mashmods.com – coming next month, a mod to avoid the embarrassment of sidetalkin' in public. It's a paper bag.

● www.mashmods.com




## RETRO MUSIC

Time was that everyone who played videogames could fit under the broad banner of nerd. Now the hobby's so big it's split into different subcultures of insults: AV nerd, emulation nerd, 16bit nerd, chip-music nerd, Sega nerd and so on. Consider those five subcultures united, though, by DC Evolution's SC68 project, a Dreamcast disk that contains 1,800 Atari ST and Amiga tunes for you to listen to. Based on Benjamin Gerard's Dream68 player, the contents are sure to stir memories for those who spent the early '90s hanging around bulletin board systems and protesting the death of their favourite home computer.

DREAM68
Play-List controls
Activate the File-Browser window and select the file entry corresponding to the Play-List window selected entry.
Remove the cursor location entry from play-list.
Run play list from the Play-List window cursor location.
The Play-List window is used to build a list of music that will be played from top to bottom order.

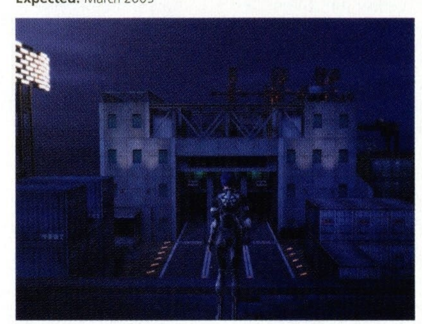
● www.dcevolution.net

# INCOMING

Announcements and updates

## Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex

**Format:** PS2
**Publisher:** Atari
**Expected:** March 2005



More clinically reserved than the breakneck PS1 title, Cavia's unique – sometimes unnecessarily so – action-platformer should be bewildering European audiences early next year

## Kameo: Elements Of Power

**Format:** Xbox
**Publisher:** Microsoft
**Expected:** TBC



Two years of wedging a Cube-shaped game into an X-shaped hole hasn't been enough, with a further delay announced to the Elf Formerly Known As A Fairy's quest for a demographic

## Ninja Project (working title)

**Format:** PS2
**Publisher:** Spike
**Expected:** 2005



Five years after making *Tenchu 2*, Acquire has announced its return to the business of honourable death. The wait is on to discover what style of game will emerge from the shadows

## Rifts

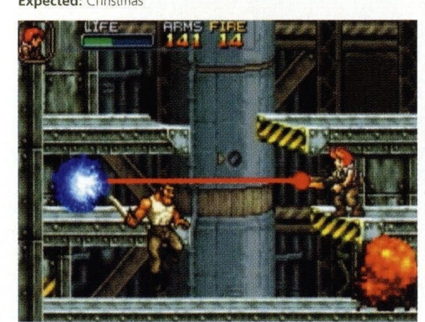
**Format:** N-Gage
**Publisher:** Nokia
**Expected:** June 2005




The Rifts tabletop RPG has been a genre-clash apocalypse waiting to be digital for years: Backbone's dedication to the licence might result in the N-Gage's very own *Shadowrun*

## Metal Slug Advance

**Format:** GBA
**Publisher:** Ignition
**Expected:** Christmas




Inspired by the Neo-Geo Pocket incarnation of the micro killorama, this version brings a health bar and a card collection sub-game to the mix of hostages and helicopters

## Hitman: Blood Money

**Format:** PC, PS2, Xbox
**Publisher:** Eidos
**Expected:** Q1 2005



Though the blood's barely cooled on 47's last outing, *Blood Money* intends to bring home the economics of killing, with your options now governed by payment from previous hits









# ENGAGEMENT RING

**Step into the underworld. www.blackmonday.com.au**

INTERVIEW

# Yuji Naka on the road

**Edge caught up with Sonic Team front man, Yuji Naka during his visit to Australia. Naka-san talks about games, their future and crashing in a souped-up Lotus...**

The gaming world is enamoured with the celebrity of Yuji Naka. The creator of *Sonic The Hedgehog* and countless other Sega classics is almost as revered as Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto. And why not? During the SNES Vs. MegaDrive generation, it could be argued the two men were unparalleled rivals, the pique of an industry's creativity bottled up in human form.

Today is a little different to those days though, with Sega now making games for Nintendo and Naka-san and Miyamoto-san no longer enemies, but friends. So how did things change, and has it been for the better?

**"While I am working closely with Nintendo for our debut DS title, *Feel the Magic*, I am yet to receive development kits for the PSP."**

"It's disappointing on many levels that Sega is no longer a hardware company," Naka-san reveals. "However, it has afforded myself and my team the opportunity to experience working with different companies and overcoming different hardware. To that end, I feel very lucky."

Having helped mature our love of videogames since his explosive work with Sonic The Hedgehog, Naka-san has moved from creative strength to creative strength. Despite the lack of in-house hardware to play with and with an industry on the verge of further technological exploitation, Naka-san is in a prime position to further his status as one of the industry's most prolific creators.

"I am very excited about the prospects of both the Nintendo DS and Sony's PSP," Naka-san says with a grin. "Though at the moment, while I am working closely with Nintendo for our debut DS title, *Feel the Magic*, I am yet to receive development kits for the PSP."

It's no secret the industry is in a bit of confusion over the state of Sony's handheld entrant, and the constant remarks regarding battery life have quelled ideas the system will be ready by year's end. Considering an enigmatic and well-known designer like Naka-san has been left out of the design loop does little to warrant faith in Sony's handheld business model.

"I am concerned about the battery life of the machine," Naka-san continues. "But hopefully Sony will be able to deliver more information and final development kits before the end of the year."

Handheld development isn't the only forefront though, and with the state of play across the world, Naka-san and Sonic Team have a wonderful opportunity to exploit creative endeavours across a variety of platforms and demographics.




"The Xbox is not very strong in Japan," Naka-san explains. "However, its success in Europe, Australia and North America ensure we'll continue to support the format. We will focus heavily on PS2 development where possible and our relationship with Nintendo is very strong."

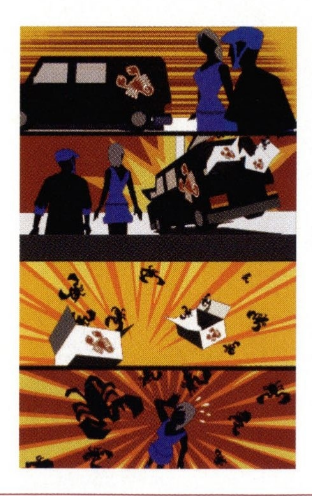
It was rumoured around the development time of *Super Smash Bros. Melee* for GameCube that Sonic would appear as an unlockable character. **Edge** asked Naka-san if there is any foundation to this rumour, to which he replied, "it was very close, but time constraints did not allow us to continue with the idea." We can see the tears welling in Nintendo and Sega fanboy eyes as we type this out, but don't rule anything out just yet.

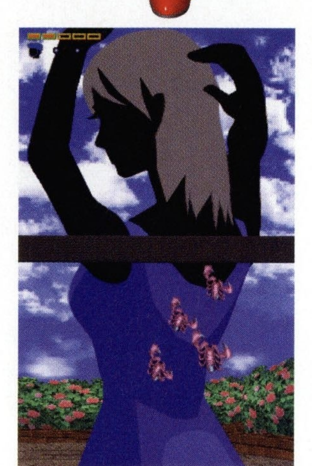
"The experience has left a door open for us to work with Nintendo on something similar in the future," Naka-san concludes. "So we may see Sonic and Mario working [or fighting] together soon."

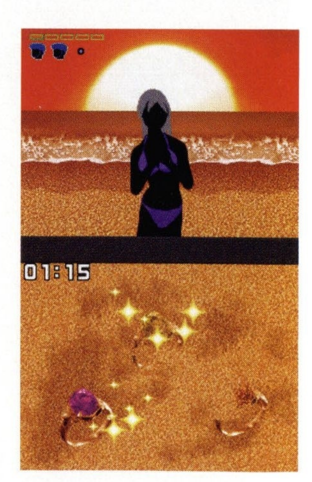
If Naka-san's words ring true, it will close a bitter chapter of competition in videogaming, opening a new one in cooperation.

## Why Australia?

**When Edge asked Naka-san why he had come to Australia he handed us a piece of paper with an image of a Lotus blazoned with Sonic artwork. "Some personal time and some race time," Naka-san explained. "Though I don't take racing as seriously as the other drivers, if I did, I might crash and not be able to create games anymore." We definitely wouldn't want to see that happen.**





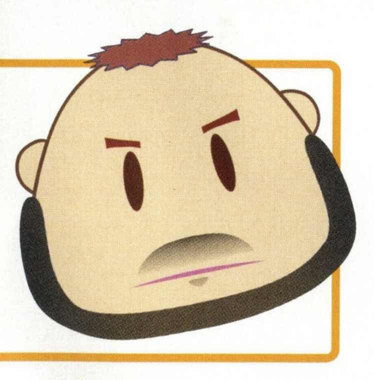


SOMETHING ABOUT

# Japan

## Happy to be late to the party

**Producer/director Brick Bardo considers what the biggest game of the year means to the Japanese**



I have such a strange feeling right now. Here is **Edge**, a magazine I love to read, quite a name in the industry in Japan... and I've been given the opportunity to write for it. But about what? Well, as a man from the industry who's worked on quite a few games, I guess there are many things I could write about. But first: let me introduce myself.

I work for a Japanese game maker – a famous one, actually. I work as a producer, and sometimes as a director, according to what's required on a particular project. Since I joined the games industry I have been involved in several action adventure games and also others based on famous licences here in Japan. I'm working hard right now on a new action game for PS2; I have just a couple of months left before the master version is ready, so I probably don't need to tell you that we are in the middle of a very harsh period, and my staff are quite exhausted! But, in a sense, I'm happy that we have a few months to go before the master date, because if we were already at the moment when we had to come out with the master, it would be: 'argh!' Why? Simply because we aren't ready? No, not at all. It is just that at the end of the year, in Japan, something frightening is lurking in the dark – a monster. Am I talking about the launch of two new pieces of hardware – PSP and DS? Well, these are quite big events in themselves, but no, I'm talking about something bigger than them. I'm talking about the mighty *Dragon Quest VIII* on PS2.

"What?! Why that game?" you might ask. I believe it is hard for people outside of Japan to measure the impact of the release of a new *Dragon Quest* title, but in the Japanese games industry a *Dorakue* is always a major event. Just look at these figures: after December 9, 1995, *DQVI* on the Super Famicom sold 3.2m copies. Five years later, *DQVII* on PS1 sold no less than 4.12m in total after its release on August 26, 2000. But you have to look closely at two important factors here: the release dates and the platforms. *DQVI* was released on the Super Famicom a year after the PS1 had become available; *DQVII* was released on PS1 two-and-a-half years after the PS2 was launched.

Yes, Japanese gamers are sensitive to trends and are often moving in a big way in the same direction. So normally when something new, a hot item, is attracting attention, the old one is forgotten as people think of it as a 'has been'. The same rule applies to the wider games industry: when a new console comes on to the market, software for the old one dries up quickly, and the old system finds its place in the closet, where it will be almost forgotten – maybe it will resurface on a rare occasion, but basically it is dead.

This rule does not apply for *Dorakue*. When a new episode is released, people are ready to revive their previous systems purely to enjoy the game.

But why are the Japanese so passionate about *Dragon Quest*? I guess the main reason is that it was the first RPG people enjoyed here. In the west, before the videogame appeared in people's homes there were many pencil-and-paper RPGs, such as Dungeons & Dragons, but in Japan these games did not find their way into our lives. Why? Well, Japanese people are very shy. The real thrill with these pencil-and-paper RPGs is the possibility to become a warrior, a magician or a thief and act that way, and see how the adventure unfolds according to your actions and decisions. This is the fun about these games. The Japanese prefer to experience their adventures through a thirdperson perspective, not directly.

**When a new console comes on to the market, software for the old one dries up, and the old system finds its place in the closet, where it will be almost forgotten – maybe it will resurface on a rare occasion, but basically it is dead**

It is like watching a movie. When the original

Hori has outdone even its *Onimusha 3* katana with its *DQVIII* controller: an accurate, if firmer, rendition of a *DQ* slime

Star Wars was brought into Japanese theatres, the producer at that time, Gary Kurtz, got a very bad impression about the Japanese audience. While in America everybody was shouting when the Death Star exploded at the end of the movie, not a single Japanese spectator said a single word. It is not that the Japanese did not enjoy Star Wars – on the contrary. It is just that the Japanese hate to demonstrate their feelings in front of others, so they don't want to react noisily as the movie unfolds in front of their eyes, or to become one with the character appearing on screen; they prefer to just watch the movie.

Therefore, it was not *Wizardry* or *Ultima* in their Japanese localised versions that taught the shy Japanese players the fun of roleplaying games, but *Dragon Quest*, and in this regard it is correct to say that RPG = *Dorakue*. So, the biggest competitor to the new pieces of hardware from Nintendo and Sony is a piece of software. (Of course, this time, because the game is going to be released on a current console, we will not have to open our closets in search of an old system.) To make things as bad as possible for the two new consoles, the new Square Enix game is going to be sold for a record price tag: ¥8,800 ($109) before tax, which is around ¥2,000 ($25) more extensive than standard PS2 games. So buying this new *Dragon Quest* will leave less money for people to spend on other items.

So *Dorakue VIII* stands clearly as the only winner for the end of this year in Japan. I have to confess that when *Dragon Quest VII* was released in 2000, I had a game of my own being released at the same time: needless to say my game was blown away, like many others that day. That's why this time I'm relieved that we're still a few months away from entering the master process, and not in middle of it – meaning that my game will get a chance this time!




Though *GTA* and *Halo* are learning fast, it's *DQ* that was the original nation-stopper. There's still no confirmation of a western release, but hopes remain high – though storefront campouts are unlikely

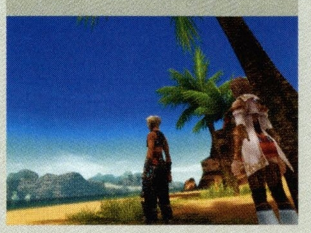
# Hype

The future of electronic entertainment



## Edge's most wanted

### Final Fantasy XII



There was a time when we never wanted to see the words *Final Fantasy* again, but the potential of wiping clean such an elaborate template is impossible to resist.
PS2, SQUARE ENIX

### Katamari Damacy Oni



We've been sustaining ourselves with the soundtrack, feeding our hunger with desktop wallpapers. It's not enough to satisfy, however: we need new worlds to consume.
PS2, NAMCO

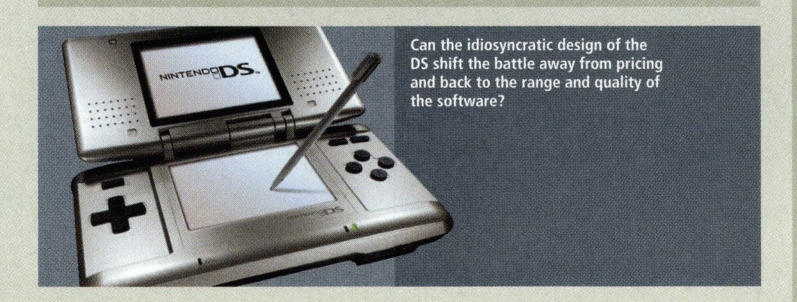
### Yoshi's Universal Gravitation



*Mawaru: Made In Wario* has proven that the tilt technology works, and the idea of it married to Yoshi's delectable sketch-book universe is an entirely irresistible prospect.
GBA, NINTENDO

## Winner loses all?

### The real casualty of the handheld battle




Can the idiosyncratic design of the DS shift the battle away from pricing and back to the range and quality of the software?

By the time this magazine is in your hands, a Nintendo DS will have been in ours for nearly a month. Or perhaps you're not reading this and are playing on your own DS, having taken advantage of the poor US dollar and a courier company. Either way, it's here. From press release to coat pocket in less than a year.

Just as speedy have been the shifts in the power balance between the DS and the PSP. Last month Nintendo had Sony on the ropes. The DS' pricing, the line-up and the timing all seemed perfect. Sony was on the back foot, still prevaricating about battery life, the chance of a Christmas launch slipping through its fingers. And then, that number. ¥20,790. ($105). No-one, least of all Nintendo, was braced for something that aggressive. Rumours had been circulating that the price would be nearly double that, ¥38,000 ($482) or thereabouts. The higher number certainly seemed more plausible, once you start to add up the price of the PSP's components.

And so the speculation merely shifts. Now it's not 'what's it going to cost me', it's 'what's it going to cost Sony'. Some commentators have suggested Sony could be losing as much as $767 per unit. Assuming licensing costs are similar for PSP games as for PS2, Sony would then need to convince each new PSP owner to shell out for more than 20 games before it makes its money back.

And where does that leave Nintendo? For the second time in as many launches, it's been undercut by a manufacturer which prizes profile over profit. The GameCube was one of the most sensible propositions gaming has ever seen. Purely for games, cheap to make, profitable to sell, its price clearly differentiated it from the competition. And then Microsoft slashed the Xbox, and Nintendo's hardware couldn't compete. The DS was the same plan, boxed differently. But with a slender $51 separating the Japanese prices, it's hard to know if its inventiveness will sustain it against the superior specs and looks of the PSP.

Competition is supposed to be healthy. However, the impact of the fight for market share – Microsoft going after the all-conquering PS2, and Sony going after Nintendo's handheld crown – has been to drive hardware profitability out of the industry. Does that really make them winners?

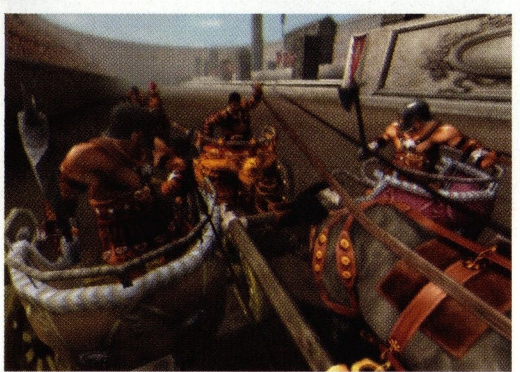





FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEB 2005**

# Shadow Of Rome

## In which Keiji Inafune gives us a school textbook on ancient Rome, with added aerial cruelty to animals

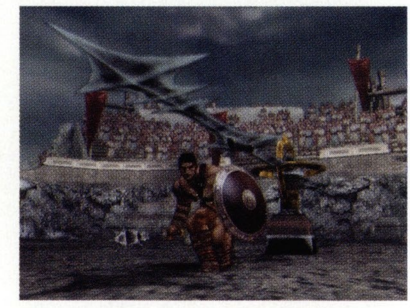


Typically, Capcom games deal with subjects as variously grounded in realism as persistent zombies (*Resident Evil*), haunted hotels (*Gregory Horror Show*) and medieval boxer shorts (*Maximo*). Even when they touch on the historical – *Onimusha*, for example – it's a resolutely mythical take. But *Shadow Of Rome* is different: it's a dramatic reconstruction of events in ancient Rome, asking questions about who killed Caesar, sending the player on a mission to free their framed father and for once promising fact over fiction.

That's the main reason that **Keiji Inafune**, the *Onimusha* creator who's leading this project, claims it's not that *Shadow Of Rome* is different from Capcom games, it's that it's different from games full stop: "Well, rather than saying this is different from Capcom's other games, probably this game is different from all the others. There are a lot of games that take a historical backdrop, but this one is widely based on fact. You can learn history at the same time. With regards to the references, the team came over to Europe, visited ruins, read books, saw Gladiator…"

Gladiator. Okay, so perhaps the game's not entirely factual, then, but there aren't any Argonaut-style skeletons rising from the ground, and that alone is a serious concession when it comes to Capcom's vivid imagination. *Shadow Of Rome* is split into two sections, the stealthy adventure-game inquiries of Octavius, and the substantially less subtle gladiatorial conflicts of his friend Agrippa. This is where the influence of Gladiator comes to the fore, severed limbs and all. It's a bloody game, and another departure for Capcom.

"Obviously we don't expect children to play the game, but having said that, it's based on fact. This actually happened. Some of it is maybe exaggerated a little bit for the game, but this is what happened, actually, and people have to acknowledge it." Torsos cleaved in two, knives thrust straight through prone enemies, and this: "AERIAL CRUELTY



Arenas aren't static playgrounds, but filled with tricks and toys that prove as deadly as they are useful. Some must be activated to progress; others are merely bloody

> "It's based on fact. This actually happened. Some of it is exaggerated a little bit for the game, but this is what happened, actually, and people have to acknowledge it"




Meat Sculptor: The bloodier Agrippa's actions, the more respect (in the form of Salvos, visible in the bottom right of the screen) he'll get from the crowd. You can invent your own combos for better scores





Stealthy, dishy Octavius has no direct combat skills, but can eliminate guards with nearby objects, guile and (conceivably) his boyish good looks. This may not work on tigers, however





Agrippa's violent endeavours in the arena aren't just for the crowd's sadistic entertainment, of course. The overall winner of the tournament will get the opportunity to execute Agrippa's father – and if Agrippa wins, he can spare him







Down an enemy and Agrippa will follow with a celebratory finishing move. If your opponent's not quite dead, it's easy enough to stick a knife through him to make sure

TO ANIMALS!" The object in the gladiatorial sections isn't just to win the fight, but to entertain, and each particularly entertaining move is rewarded with an absurd on-screen combo shout and a rise in appreciation from the onlookers. Aerial Cruelty To Animals is the *Tony Hawk*-style flash when you down an eagle with a rock; combat in Capcom's coliseums doesn't just take place between humans, and Agrippa must also fight elephants and tigers on his way through the game.

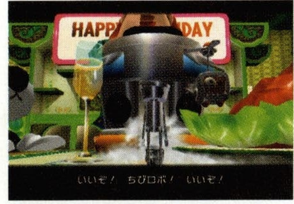
The other obligatory part of the game ("It's divided by chapters, so you have to clear all of them. Having said that, there are lots of variations within the same chapter, so the second time through the game you'll encounter different situations," explains Inafune) are the sneaky, *Metal Gear*-esque sections with Octavius. Our concerns that the two gameplay types won't mesh are dismissed by Inafune: "Though at a glance the games are so different, actually there are the same sort of operational things going on. Even with sneaking, you have to use the same methods to kill things and advance through the stages. And within the arena you have to look around to grasp the situation and please the crowd. Killing someone is not the main aim."

The point is that the puzzle-solving sections aren't ornamental, or some pointless concession to vogue stealth gaming. Despite the arena sections, which are as resolutely arcade-oriented as anything Capcom has ever released, *Shadow Of Rome* is a narrative-driven experience. And it's very difficult to tell a story within the confines of a dynamic that's just dramatic, over-the-top death after death. "Stealth play was something we needed to drive the story forward," confirms Inafune. "However, you've got some sort of main purpose – in this case you've got to find out who killed Caesar and save Agrippa's father. If you're just going to think, 'Oh, yes, stealth is vogue,' and throw in this and throw in that without thinking about the game, players will feel frustration."

There's always that risk with this kind of dynamic, and we're not entirely convinced the mesh of genres won't just end up frustrating fans of one type of game or the other. The positive way of looking at it, of course, is that there's bound to be something for everyone to enjoy here. So let's be positive, because, after all, it's very difficult to be negative about a game that offers aerial cruelty to animals.



Chibi Robo's environment originally recalled *Syndicate* more than *Toy Story*, but is now more vibrant and, with the benefit of repositioned camera angles, more immense



You enter the Sanderson family household as a birthday gift, but your novelty factor seems to wear off quickly – isn't it always the way with high-tech goods? – leaving you to work your way into their hearts

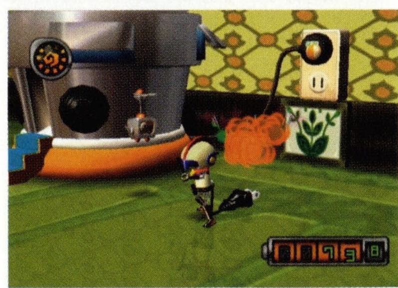


FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SKIP**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

# Chibi Robo

Skip puts the spring back into spring-cleaning with its reconditioned little helper





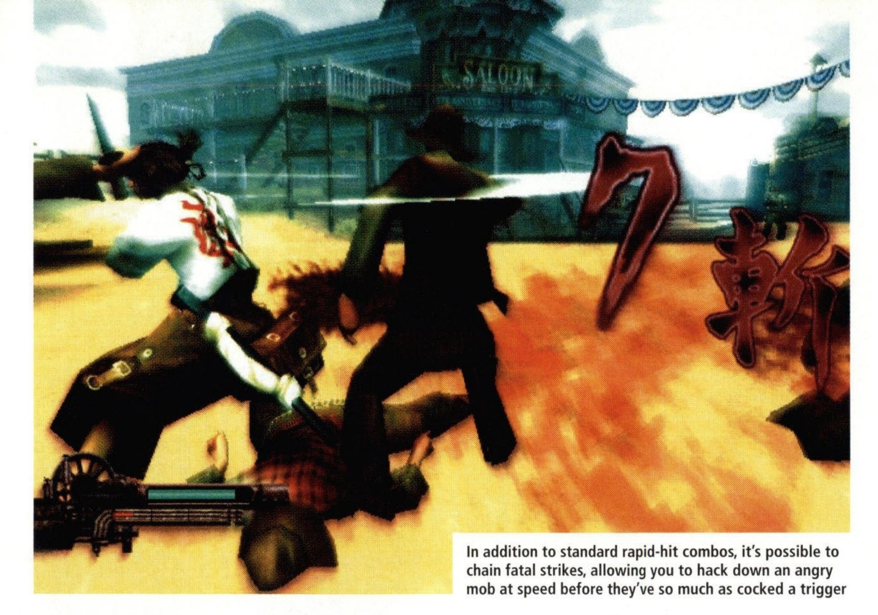
Your fellow serving robots range from a perpetually confused-looking cubist helicopter (right) to considerably more jumbo-sized models (above). It seems there's a pecking order, perhaps allowing you to call on the services of robots beneath your station

It really is the Little Robot That Could: after appearing over a year ago on Bandai's label then vanishing almost as abruptly, *Chibi Robo* has been rescued from the scrapheap by Nintendo itself, and its eccentric inventor given another chance to make good. The game's troubled development, rebirth and rescue are almost par for the course where Skip's director Kenichi Nishi is concerned. His exhilaratingly manic-depressive weblog has charted the lows of his despair over 'communication RPG' *Giftpia*'s underperformance and *Chibi Robo*'s lack of focus to the highs of his excitement over developing for the DS – even pre-empting Nintendo's official announcement, resulting in a hasty update pretending he had lied.

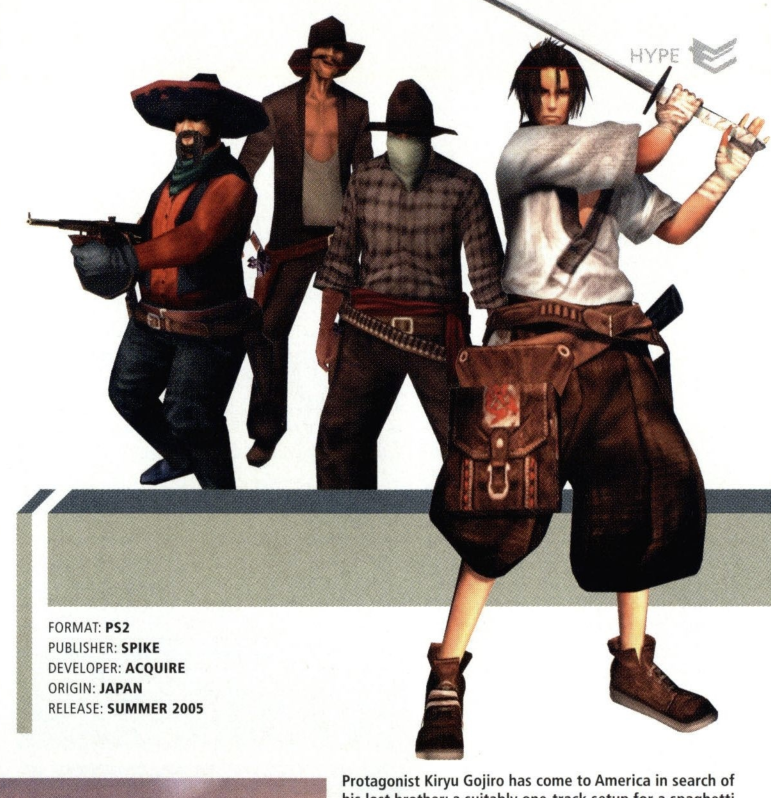
The DS game aside, *Chibi Robo*'s second incarnation leaves its ten-centimetre stainless-steel hero unchanged, but revises his diminutive role in the world. Originally tasked to free his masters from a pair of burglars who had broken into the family home, the redesigned game returns the domestic situation to normal (or at least as normal as the gloriously gaudy environments allow, apparently having received a spring-clean of their own since the sterile originals). If *Pikmin* was a paean to gardening, this is Skip's guide to good housekeeping, it being your task to mend, clean, find lost objects and attend to your family and their pets in an effort to become the house's best robot. It's unclear from what we've seen so far how your fellow menial machines will take to your overachieving, but healthy competition can probably be expected.

Your human masters go about their daily lack of chores in realtime, with a day-to-night cycle determining their locations and actions: a more pressing time consideration, though, is your robot's battery life. Constantly winding down as he travels, any more strenuous activities, such as springing helicopter blades or a variety of other context-sensitive tools, require an extra energy outlay. The plug he trails can be inserted into a wall socket to recharge, or alternately allow him to become a walking battery and transfer power into an idle appliance to gain its beneficial effects. Power points are dotted around the initial areas with sympathetic regularity, suggesting that even if the original design's game-ending penalty for running dry has carried over, it won't prove to be too oppressively unfair a feature.

Nintendo's endorsement, and possibly design guidance, seems to have given *Chibi Robo* the spark even its creator had felt was missing: despite its mechanical subject matter, it's now vibrantly alive – and the tinkering and tuning until its yet-to-be-announced release date can only amplify that sensation.




In addition to standard rapid-hit combos, it's possible to chain fatal strikes, allowing you to hack down an angry mob at speed before they've so much as cocked a trigger

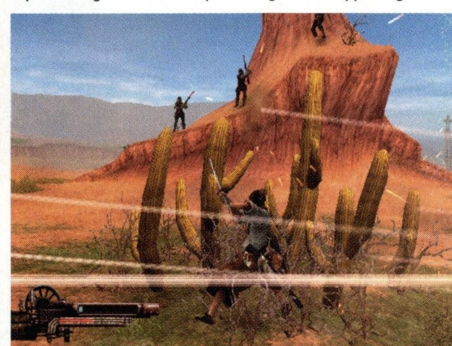


# Samurai Western

## The Way Of The Samurai meets The Way Of The Gun as Acquire goes Red Dead Katana

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SPIKE**
DEVELOPER: **ACQUIRE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2005**

Protagonist Kiryu Gojiro has come to America in search of his lost brother: a suitably one-track setup for a spaghetti western, but perhaps not for the Rashomon-style triplecrossing that made the previous games so appealing



Acquire is a small developer with a big name, having created the *Tenchu* ninja series before moving on to another romanticised feudal ideal with *Way Of The Samurai*. The first two instalments proved popular in Japan, and gained some cult success in the west for their relatively freeform play (if not quite living up to their positioning as the eastern answer to *GTAIII*). But for this third title Acquire and long-time publisher Spike are attempting a new spin to court western success. As with Sega's latest *Sakurai Taisen* game, the idea of western appeal has been taken literally, and perhaps mistakenly, to mean wild western – with a change of setting from 19th century Japan to the American frontier.

Also left to the Edo period are the free-roaming adventure elements, with *Samurai Western* focusing on action: not the careful duels of previous games, but the less artful clash between swordsman and gunslinger. The hero, honour-bound to fight only with a katana, must overcome gangs of less sporting enemies armed with pistols, shotguns and machine guns. As well as the historically verifiable technique of diving for cover, various special moves can be used to even the odds: the Hajiki method allows the samurai to deflect incoming bullets with his blade or, with practice, even send them back at his assailants. The Kawashi technique can be used to dash out of the path of an otherwise fatal bullet, and if triggered with perfect timing provides an opportunity to close the distance to the attacker before he can readjust his aim.

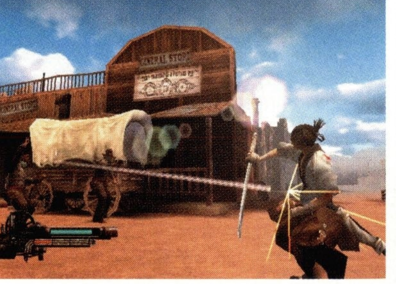
Other moves, such as mortal strikes, can be acquired through gaining levels or finding new blades, suggesting that both the simple character growth and weapon-collecting aspects of previous *WOTS* titles have survived the journey intact. An element hopefully left behind will be the weak camera, as *Samurai Western*'s action makeover includes a potentially disastrous new focus on platforming elements – from rooftop duels to an inevitable wagon-to-wagon train-jumping sequence. While the game world has been greatly expanded to take in this variation, it's now strictly a stage-by-stage progression, with only the occasional unlockable side-level to be found off the scripted path.




Collectible swords will include pairs, but the arcade focus of *Samurai Western* may mean there's little marked difference in mechanics between one-handed and two sword techniques

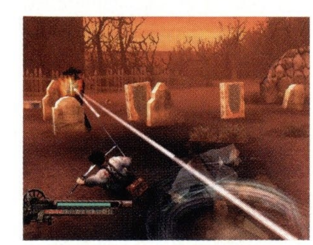
Despite the starry-eyed enthusiasm the developer and publisher show for the project (voice acting has already been recorded in Los Angeles, we're reverentially informed), there's the niggling doubt that perhaps the features most likely to appeal to western audiences are those that have been discarded. Shorn of its branching plot, warring families and freedom to make your own ending, all the game has left is its admittedly appealing style – but the thirdperson slasher is a market both overcrowded and shrinking.

Tellingly, Spike and Acquire have avoided presenting the game as the 'true' *WOTS3*, stating such a game would be set in familiar territory – something that may be more palatable to western fans who are not necessarily fans of westerns.





The shot-reflecting technique looks to come in for heavy use, with distant riflemen requiring accurate return fire (top right). Hopefully the ricochet sound effects will be given the full Leone treatment

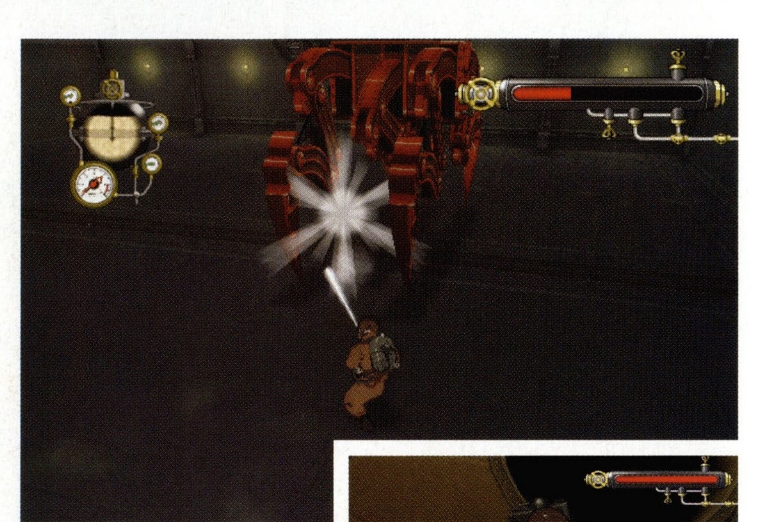


In addition to saving your health (and that all-important ranking), the last minute dash can be used to speed across open ground to the next patch of cover

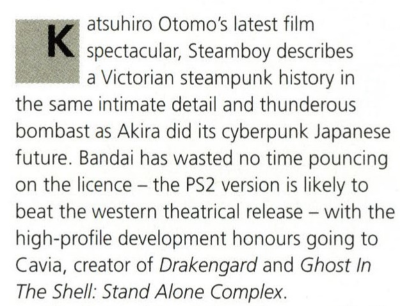
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **CAVIA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005**

# Steamboy

## The Akira creator's hymn to Victoriana begets an action adventure replete with bells and whistles



The Steam Ball can be upgraded by collecting gears, which add new abilities or increase its steam capacity – which you'll be thankful of when holding off 19th century war machines



Katsuhiro Otomo's latest film spectacular, Steamboy describes a Victorian steampunk history in the same intimate detail and thunderous bombast as Akira did its cyberpunk Japanese future. Bandai has wasted no time pouncing on the licence – the PS2 version is likely to beat the western theatrical release – with the high-profile development honours going to Cavia, creator of *Drakengard* and *Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex*.

The game picks up from the second half of the plot, with young Mancunian James Ray Steam beginning his ascent of the Steam Tower, a massive flying fortress, to a final confrontation at its summit – which will feature a divergent ending from the film's. Progressing through the hazardous engine halls of the tower requires the use of Steam's pressurised Steam Ball, the deus ex machina of the piece. It can be used to blast enemies or objects aside, thaw frozen machinery, provide a hydraulic-assisted double jump and can even be ridden – the entire fifth stage of the game is touted as a high-speed flight sequence. Using any of the Steam Ball's actions drains its pressure, so water sources must be located to keep it on the boil.



The initial released screens seem to use the PS2's entire yearly quota of bronze and pillarbox red, but hopefully the film's breathtaking open-air scenes will feature later

Crisp cel-shading seems to have captured the essence of the material well, although whether the engine is up to replicating the intricate mechanical design is another matter. Visuals have never been Cavia's weak point, more concerning is how the signal-to-noise of their fantastic design but occasionally inconsistent implementation will play out. At least Steam's adventure should be anything but assembly-line.

# Baten Kaitos: Eternal Wings And The Lost Ocean

## If Baten Kaitos were real, then Clinton's would be the most dangerous place in the world

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH SOFT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (US), TBA (AU)**



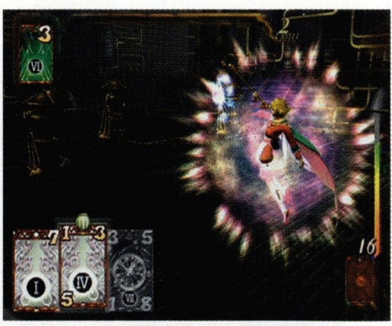


Levelling up isn't automatic. Once you've amassed enough experience you'll need to teleport to a mysterious cathedral and politely ask the priest to upgrade you

It's hard to talk about card battle games without talking *about* card battle games. To many gamers they seem like an exercise in completing a pointless circuit: videogames borrowing back the flimsy bits of paper which were the only way the real world could represent the spectacular attacks and characters which card games had borrowed from videogames in the first place. To others, they're gaming at its purest – the twin disciplines of collecting and strategising distilled into something tangible. Whatever your viewpoint, *Baten Kaitos* looks likely to surprise you.

The first surprise is that, for a card-battle RPG, *Baten*'s fights are fast-paced and spectacular – particularly when compared to the disappointments of *Phantasy Star Online*'s card-based incarnation. Attacks, defence moves and items are all confined to cards, and you'll need to string together combos on a basis of instinct, fast fingers and careful observation of your enemy's weaknesses. And it's not just in battle that the cards are crucial – as you travel through the game your entire inventory is represented by them, and you'll need to use blank cards to absorb elements and items you find along your way.





Elemental strengths and weaknesses are at the core of the game's strategic challenge, but they also form the cornerstone of its spectacular visuals. A single card can erupt in a fountain of light and death, and can help you extend a combo attack

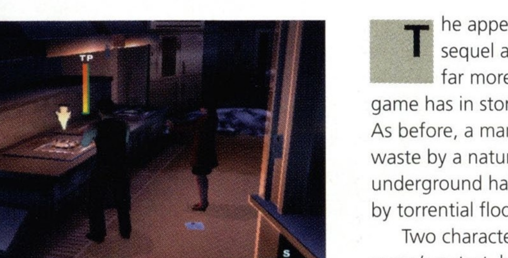
The story is also surprising, although GameCube owners have been spoiled with lavish worlds and engaging tales over the last few months. Grumpy hero Kalas brings a refreshingly unsentimental approach instead of the mawkish morals common to many RPGs. He'll methodically set about plundering the corpses of fallen travellers while their companion stands sobbing over the bodies of her dead friends. Also surprising is the first moment he turns to camera and talks to you direct. For once you, as the player, have a real place in the world, and your text-based conversations with Kalas will be detected as supernatural whispers on the wind from other NPCs.

No AU release is confirmed, but a warm reception in the US might convince Namco to bring the game to PAL.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **IREM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

# Disaster Report 2

**How to survive Bydo invasion, then an earthquake, now a flood: Irem continues its public service announcements**



**Once a character is soaked – either from being dunked in the flood or caught in the downpour – the cold sets in, making the search for a heat source a necessity**

The appearance of a *Disaster Report* sequel at the last TGS was a surprise far more pleasant than those the game has in store for its hapless inhabitants. As before, a man-made arcology is laid to waste by a natural catastrophe – this time an underground habitat, the Geocity, stricken by torrential floodwaters.

Two characters are available at the game's outset, both working as catering staff for the Geocity's inaugural ceremony while a storm lashes against the surface-level glass ceiling. After a brief acclimatisation period of wheeling trolleys, serving drinks and watching ominous pools gather in the corridors, the water breaks loose. At first an ankle-deep swell, it rapidly builds to a structure-gouging flood, carving the environment into the precarious, teetering adventure playground that characterised the first game.

The water brings its own set of hazards: a sudden wave can knock your character head over heels, currents inexorably pull towards yawning chasms, and flood-carried debris (ranging, as the game progresses, from sofas to tanker trailers) lurches into view at the most inopportune moments. If the original's desperate search for drinking water is made an ironic memory, the new constant threat is the bitter cold, with the sight of the bedraggled survivors huddled and shivering an effective reminder of their frailty.

Featuring jump scares to rival the best survival horrors and well-paced level (re)design – especially the main concourse's transformation from plush chandelier-lit chic to murky subterranean grotto – there are more than enough positives here to forgive the familiar flaws. These include a blundering camera, slippery controls and polygon-intensive environments that can choke the framerate even before a thousand tons of water are cascading through them. Credit to the game's charm, then, that the only disaster here is entirely intentional.





**Set to an incessant Christmas jingle, the game's prologue extends the calm before the storm to expertly excruciating length: then light, warmth and safety in numbers are all wrenched away in rapid succession**

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2005, TBA (AU)**

# Kagero 2: Dark Illusion

**In a dark, dark house in a dark, dark wood lies that most unpredictably monstrous of fairytale villains: you**

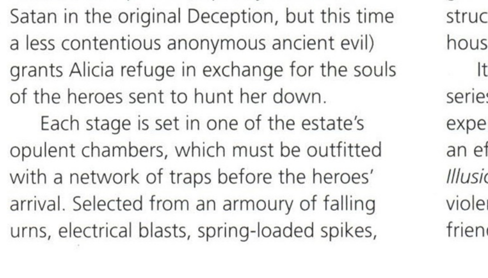
**The first level on display finds you disposing of a young squire. Going by Deception's past, his grieving family will soon investigate, with equally fatal consequences**



Like *Dungeon Keeper* without the air of cheerfulness, Tecmo's *Deception* series (of which *Kagero* is an offshoot) garnered a cult following from its unusual concept: playing a mansion-bound villain who must lay a network of deathtraps to dispose of intruding do-gooders. The games' attention to the art and science of mass murder was ghoulishly addictive, but their strongest suit was a celebration of sadism that, were it not for the fantasy environment, could make *Manhunt* blanch.

*Dark Illusion*'s lead executioner is the princess Alicia, falsely accused of murdering her father the king and forced to flee to a remote castle in the Black Forest. The castle's resident dark power (explicitly named as Satan in the original Deception, but this time a less contentious anonymous ancient evil) grants Alicia refuge in exchange for the souls of the heroes sent to hunt her down.

Each stage is set in one of the estate's opulent chambers, which must be outfitted with a network of traps before the heroes' arrival. Selected from an armoury of falling urns, electrical blasts, spring-loaded spikes, pendulum blades and worse, each type of trap possesses properties that, ideally choreographed, can form a combo to finish off your victims as quickly as possible.



The action then proceeds in thirdperson, with the player's task to keep Alicia out of harm's way while luring her pursuers into it, then triggering the traps with the correct timing and sequence. Success results in a slow-motion replay that segues dementedly from slapstick to shlock horror.

The more grimly efficient your performance (it's unclear whether the Genocide Bonus from *Kagero* makes a reappearance), the more traps will be available for use in further stages: previous games have also featured a branching structure depending on who, if any, of your house guests you choose to spare.

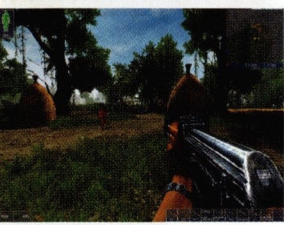
It will be interesting to see if original series producer Keisuke Kikuchi's experimentation with *Fatal Frame* has had an effect on the development of *Dark Illusion*. Either way, it's certainly providing the violence to complement the sex of his friendly rival Itagaki's *Dead Or Alive*.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP SHADOWS**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **2005**

# Boiling Point: Road To Hell

**This jungle-based shooter from the Ukraine is ambitious, but will Deep Shadows' game prove to be a cry too far?**





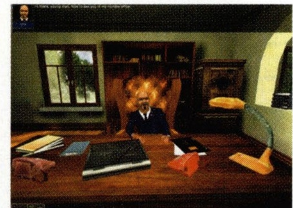
**Missions for different factions require different tactics and a variety of guns. Hunting wildlife is also possible, though more for sport than for practical use**

A complex, non-linear shooting-oriented adventure, *Boiling Point*'s ambition can't be faulted. Encompassing every inch of a mythical South American locale ruled by a variety of colourful, clichéd factions, its physical scale is impressive enough. That your character – an against-the-odds mercenary looking for his missing daughter – can take on missions for any of those factions and more besides, balancing some delicately interlocking relationships in his personal quest makes it even more so. It's a big, big game, not your traditional winding-corridor firstperson shooter, offering shades of *Deus Ex* and maybe even *Grand Theft Auto*. But while talk from the developer is bullish, ambition may not be enough.

For a start, it's a physically unattractive game, something that's undoubtedly going to count against it in the fascistic graphics-oriented world of PC gaming. Presumably that's part of a compromise between the size of the world and its beauty; it'd be a very sparse forest indeed if every tree was rendered to, say, *Far Cry* levels of majesty. Regardless, the visuals do the concept no favours. Equally, the game's combat looks random and fiddly, and irritating in that brutal, deadly manner that has become common to modern PC firstperson shooters. For a game based predominantly around point'n'click combat, that may prove an issue.

Still, there is a lot here for Atari to be proud of, and our view of the game in action hardly lasted long enough to make a perfect judgement call. Hopefully, the developer will be able to pull it off; as there's nothing wrong with the design except for perhaps a lack of restraint. The problem with trying to do so much is that often you end up falling short on each and every goal, and it looks like Deep Shadows has some polishing to do before its product matches the spectacular vision.





**Communication with NPCs plays out in *Monkey Island* style conversation trees. Talking to characters will get you new missions; it may also get you a girlfriend**

# Brothers In Arms

**Gearbox obeys the clipped tones of the sergeant-major with a realistic WWII shooter that follows all the rules**

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **GEARBOX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E1**

**Unsurprisingly, you can carry a maximum of two weapons at a time. In an effort to emphasise the authenticity of the experience, aiming is undertaken down the barrel**



There's a reason *Call Of Duty* offers such a mish-mash of settings and scenarios, taking you through missions alongside eccentric English officers in prison camps and across beaches side by side with Russian footsoldiers, and it is this: playing it by the book can be boring; far better to throw it out of the window and make up your own rules as you go along. With *Brothers In Arms*, however, Gearbox (the American developer behind the PC conversion of *Halo*) disagrees, preferring to pay its respects both to historical events and the specific nature of WWII combat.

This means, for example, an absence of levels in which you get to drive a tank while simultaneously firing upon foes like some super-scaled version of *Combat*. In *Brothers In Arms* you are the sergeant of a 12-man squad working through the American invasion of Normandy in accordance with what actually happened in 1944.

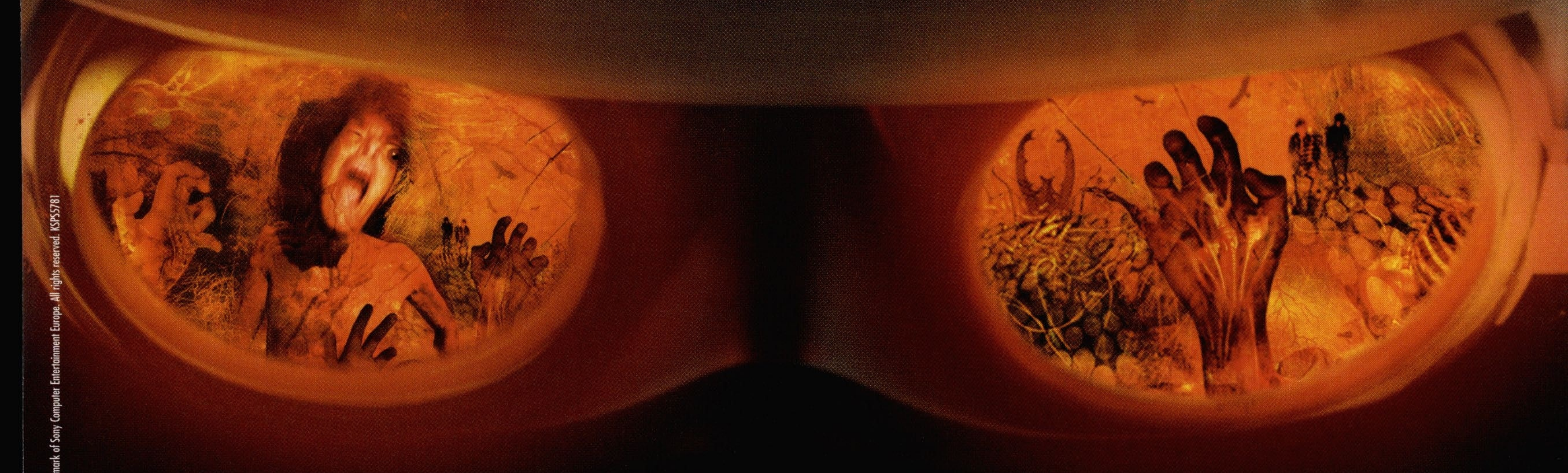
Thus, the action has a distinct Band Of Brothers flavour, with verbal exchanges between your men lending atmosphere to the storyline. The key here, though, is authenticity of combat: working as a group of three and carefully commanding those around you is how it was done in real life, so that's how it works out in the game.

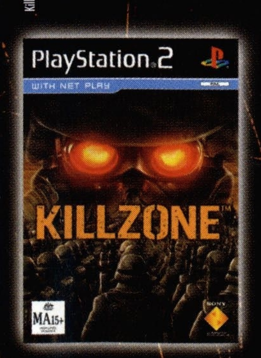
Squad-based shooters from Ubisoft are hardly anything new, but the attention to detail here elevates it above the likes of the *Rainbow Six* series and into the realm of serious unit management. The events on which it's based are legendary, which bodes well for a gripping title.



**The HUD has been designed in order to be as unobtrusive as possible, and it's possible to switch off the icons that help ease you into the action when you're starting out**

they say the eyes are the WINDOW to the Soul






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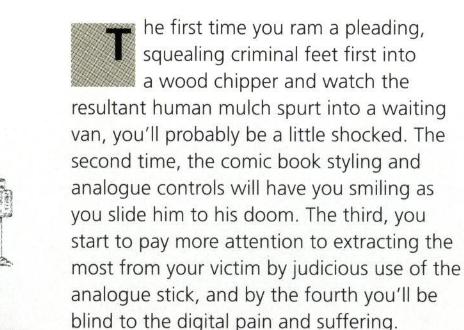
FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **VOLITION**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

# The Punisher

## It's the bloodiest, most violent game ever conceived. So why doesn't it shock?

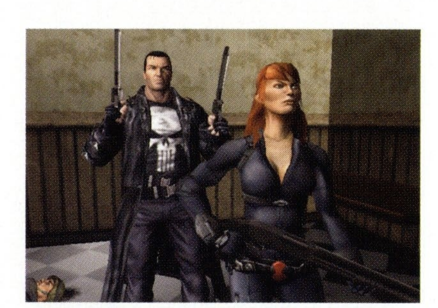
The first time you ram a pleading, squealing criminal feet first into a wood chipper and watch the resultant human mulch spurt into a waiting van, you'll probably be a little shocked. The second time, the comic book styling and analogue controls will have you smiling as you slide him to his doom. The third, you start to pay more attention to extracting the most from your victim by judicious use of the analogue stick, and by the fourth you'll be blind to the digital pain and suffering.

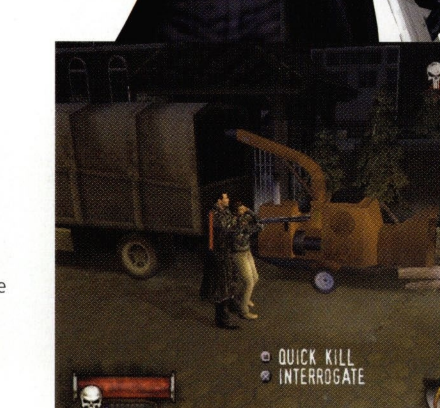
Make no mistake; despite its scenes of carnage, *The Punisher* is basically a very simple thirdperson action title. You run, you gun, you run some more and then you torture some wrong-doer, ostensibly for information, but ultimately just for kicks. Allowing the auto-aim to lock on to then while strafing can dispatch most enemies, although there is a precision manual aim available for picking off the better hidden. You can also defend yourself from attacks by taking any enemy as a human shield. It all works reasonably well and feels chunky and rewarding to begin with, although aiming can be hard, with the sticks too sensitive for fast, smooth headshots.



### Sick filth

**In the current ethical climate, *The Punisher* could be seen as either very brave or desperately inappropriate. Despite the moral crusaders' popular scapegoats *GTA* and *Manhunt* featuring a great deal of gruesome murder, neither offers the chance to torture your enemies directly. Developer Volition's stance is simple and reasonable. They didn't set out to make a violent game, they set out to make a Punisher game and the violence reflects the nature of the licence. In light of the recent retrospective banning of *Manhunt*, it's highly unlikely that *Punisher* will survive the classification process at the OFLC. Without editing, the content within is certain to be deemed as dire as *Manhunt*, or worse.**


**Black Widow is one of several characters that will fight alongside you at various points in the game. While allies aren't stunningly intelligent, they react to your actions, shooting enemies you've thrown while they're in the air**



**This is the scene of the most publicised torture machine, the wood chipper. Taking enemies with skull icons floating above their heads to skull icons in the environment allows the special interrogation to take place, with gruesome results**

You also have the option to torture any enemy you come across for both information and a boost in health, should your interrogation be successful. There's a choice of techniques available, with various beatings and the charmingly-titled Gun Tension available at any time, along with the speciality tortures at pre-determined points in the levels. These are inventive – heads in deep fat fryers, goring by rhino, cremation, a blow torch to the face and American History X-style jaw splitting – and for the most part darkly amusing. Still, for all the developer's moral high ground (see Sick filth), there is no chance for clemency. You are given the option of releasing your victims after a successful torture session, but if you do they will run to the next available weapon and start shooting. This is a comic book and the bad guys are just that. Bad. There's no moral grey area here, so you're never made to feel like anything other than a dark hero.

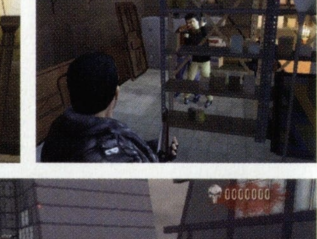
As a comic book conversion this is unusually successful. Expect to see cameos from Iron Man and Black Widow, and with a story written by the current writers of the comic there's no doubting the determination to make this an accurate adaptation.

While the simple, no-nonsense carnage is enjoyable for a while, it remains to be seen if the draw of ever-more-elaborate deaths is enough to maintain interest after the strange thrill of torture on demand wears thin.



**This is a more standard interrogation and can be preformed on any enemy at any time. All tortures rely on the player holding a marker in a particular section of a bar using the analogue stick for a set period of time**






**You can take any enemy hostage and use them as a human shield. While in some cases this will stop the other enemies from firing, usually they will just plug away at their comrades until they're dead and must be discarded**



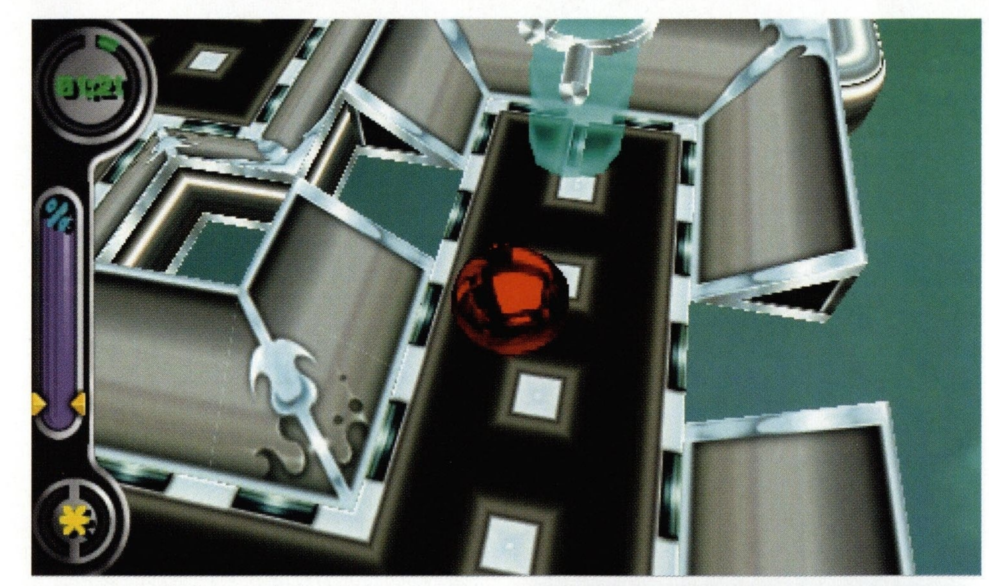
TITLE: **ARCHER MACLEAN'S MERCURY**
FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **AWESOME STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005**



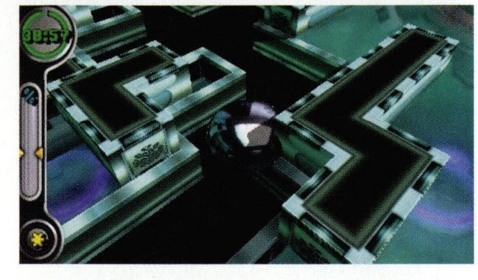
# Liquid launch

**Archer Maclean's Awesome Studios has given us something we've never seen before: a fully-working game on the PSP**

There are a few rules of interview etiquette that you should never break, and one is never kick off the conversation by enthusing about someone else's game. Sometimes the urge is hard to resist, however, and we are so keen to talk motion sensing with the man behind *Archer Maclean's Mercury* that we immediately pull out Nintendo's new twist on twisting, *Mawaru: Made In Wario* (reviewed on page 68). **Archer Maclean**, the creative director of Awesome Studios, doesn't waste any time. A few minigames, a few chuckles, and then it's on to the interrogation: "Does it use any of the buttons? How many games are there? Does it really only sense lateral movement? Why have they done that? Our one senses the full range. Is it the same technology as they used in *Tilt'n'Tumble*? Where is that, anyway?" And then there's a flurry as he digs through the stacks of papers on his desk until Kirby's cart is unearthed. He holds both to the light, scrutinising. The interview is entirely forgotten, as a new set of game possibilities is digested, deconstructed and catalogued in Maclean's mental library, ready for future reference.

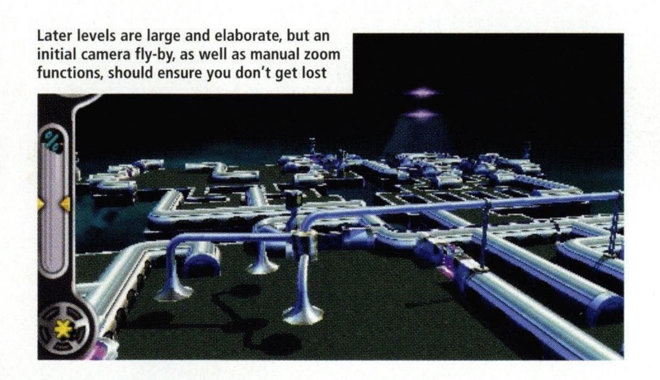


As you progress, walls disappear and safe gentle slopes give way to daredevil drops. You might finish with just enough mercury intact on your first time through, but the lure of 100 per cent guarantees replays



It's the kind of deliciously infuriating game where the control scheme has to be nanometrically perfect. Although all versions will be fully playable with an analogue thumb stick, this is where the tilt control comes into its own. Maclean and his team at Awesome have developed a proprietary tilt technology which they hope to bundle as a PSP peripheral when the game debuts. For the later home console versions, the tilt technology could be built in to a thirdparty controller. For now, the tilt device looks a little clumsy, taped on to the PSP dev kit which itself is tied to a PC by a fat umbilical of wires and cables. There's nothing clumsy, however, about its performance. Precise and sensitive, it makes an already intuitive game utterly instinctive. The PSP's gleaming screen becomes a window into a luminous world, something you peer into instead of looking at, something that has depth you can feel as well as see. It's hard to mask our disappointment when it's time to hand the dev kit back and troop back upstairs for more talking.

Later levels are large and elaborate, but an initial camera fly-by, as well as manual zoom functions, should ensure you don't get lost

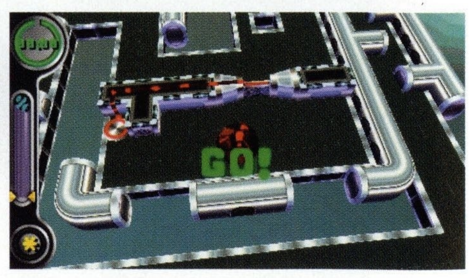


**The intention is** to have *Archer Maclean's Mercury* ready as a launch title for the PSP, but the game's genesis dates back much further. "Do you remember when you were a kid you used to play with those little puzzles from Christmas crackers?" reminisces Maclean. "A little pink thing with four ball bearings in it? Even now when a kid gets something like that – one came free with my Honey Loops last month, just put a droplet of water in and guide it around – it's still brilliant. So, one of the things we did with *Jimmy White's Cueball World* in 2001 was these bizarre subgames, and one of those was a ball in a maze. Four start points, four balls and four goals. And reviewers wrote more about that than about the main game. So about three years ago I was thinking how could I take that idea and turn it into something a bit more high-tech – because ball-in-a-maze isn't going to sell as a main game. And I thought of a liquid metal, like mercury."

But someone who's as inveterate a tinkerer as Maclean doesn't just think about mercury. "I went and bought a giant bottle, about a pint," he confesses. "I can't keep it in the office for health and safety reasons. When I was a kid – a couple of centuries ago – we had bucketfuls of the stuff in the science lab and we'd play with it. I remember pulling handfuls out, dribbling it through my fingers, throwing it at my mates, seeing how it splattered on walls. Now of course, the nanny state says everything's poisonous, even the air. So it's completely illegal to buy it, which meant I had to find a way around it. So all I did was Google 'antique barometer repairers' and I found one nearby. Then all I had to do was wander round there and convinced them I wasn't completely mad."

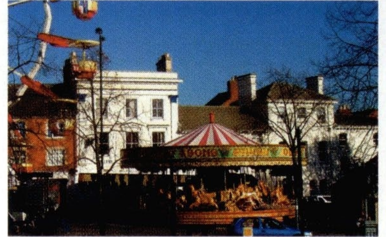
And that was only the first challenge. The team soon realised that there wasn't much design potential in emulating the real thing. "The problem with real mercury is that it splits infinitesimally - into atomic sized pieces, and we had to have a minimum size, a sixteenth of a blob," explains Maclean. "And then we had to do R&D on how to do the mesh for the skin of the blob, how to manage it at different resolutions depending on how close in you were to it, how to put two blobs side by side and gradually merge them into one bigger bean shaped blob, and then when does it split and how does it split? All of that was incredibly difficult. The maths goes up exponentially depending on how many blobs are touching each other. If there are 16 blobs all moving around, it's a nightmare. But with future consoles, maths-wise, they'll have phenomenal power, and that means in future versions the game won't be

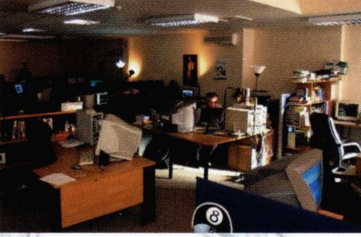





To keep the learning curve smooth, important features like this colour coded switch are introduced gradually throughout the game



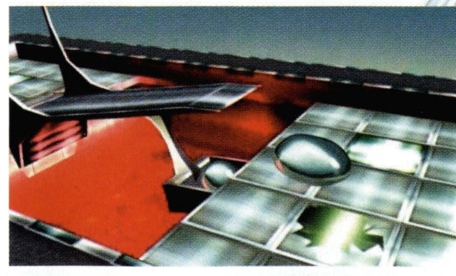







Awesome Studios is located in Banbury, England. The whole studio is working on *Mercury*, either finalising the PSP game or preparing for next year's console versions. Converted from a bank, there's room upstairs for Jimmy White's old snooker table. Downstairs there's a vault, where Maclean keeps a few choice cabs picked from his vast collection of arcade machines

"The problem with real mercury is that it splits infinitesimally - into atomic sized pieces, and we had to have a minimum size"

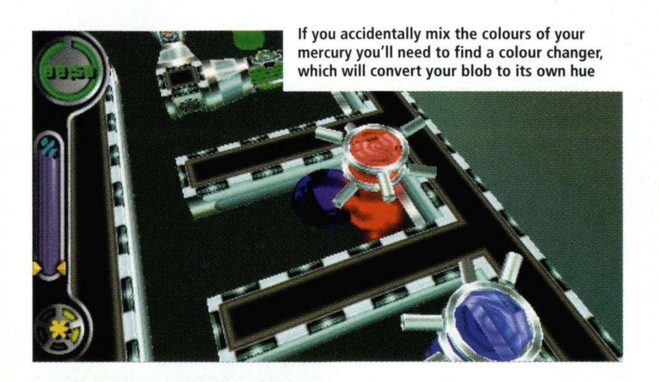





*Mercury's* complexity lies in the devices which litter the levels. Shown here at an earlier stage in the game's development, the see-saw bridge requires you to spill some of your mercury into the bucket, tipping the bridge down so you can cross. The physics of the grav bender, which sticks your blob to the ceiling, has strange side-effects, like this donut, which surprised even the designers

It's clear that any electronic curio would provoke a similar response, but Maclean has a special reason to be interested in *Mawaru*. *Mercury* will debut on PSP before making the leap to home consoles later in 2005, but the intention is to support all versions with a tilt-sensitive adaptor. It's an ambitious plan, but one which fits perfectly with the tactile, shimmery, slithery nature of the game's hero. 'Hero' may not the right word, perhaps, but there's no doubting the allure of the splotch of gleaming metal. (Is splotch the correct term? There's a hesitant silence. "The blob?" Maclean ventures.) The goal of the game is to guide the blob as it ebbs, flows and splits round tilting 3D mazes – sometimes against the clock, sometimes solving puzzles, sometimes simply trying not to spill too much. Some of the liquid metal is coloured – flow a blue blob into a red blob and you'll get purple. And while purple may open a purple switch, it won't trigger a red one or a blue one.

Other hazards are also plentiful – spinning blades, lightning rods or viciously cambered bridges. Any doctor will tell you that extended exposure to mercury can result in clammy hands, excessive perspiration and twitching eyelids. It seems likely that this game will be just as potent as its namesake.



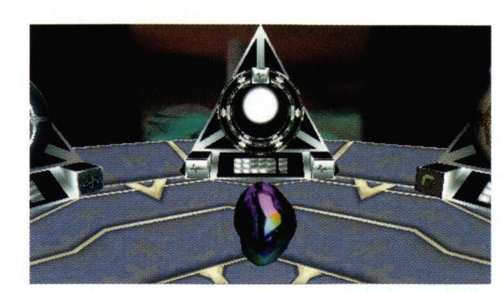
If you accidentally mix the colours of your mercury you'll need to find a colour changer, which will convert your blob to its own hue

limited to one blob. We can have whole sinkfuls of the stuff. We've not finalised anything yet, but we're not short of ideas, let's put it that way."

So why the PSP? Was the concept something Maclean had always envisaged as a handheld game? "Not really," he says. "It started life as a PC tech demo, but we knew there wasn't the market for puzzle games on the PC. So we started work on a console version, and that's what we took to show Sony. This was back in November 2002, before the PSP was known about. But suddenly this machine came along – a cute little handheld console which could run our cute little game. It wasn't that we went to Sony and said we want to do this on the PSP, it wasn't that they came to us and asked for a PSP game. We were just in the right place at the right time. It's a perfect marriage, love at first sight."

So what does he make of the PSP? Is there anything about it which frustrates him? He laughs. "The fact that I can't go out and buy one tomorrow? That frustrates me. And of course there are still a lot of unknowns, but Sony is updating us very fast, every four days or so we get updates. Oh, and I personally wish it had the thumbstick a little bigger."

It's been an odd month for the PSP in Japan, losing the limelight to the DS only to reclaim it with the news of the amazingly aggressive price. Is he pleased? "I'm surprised and delighted. It can only increase demand for the PSP. I think Sony have been up against the problem of the relatively short time they've taken to go from first announcements to actually delivering a final machine. It's almost as if

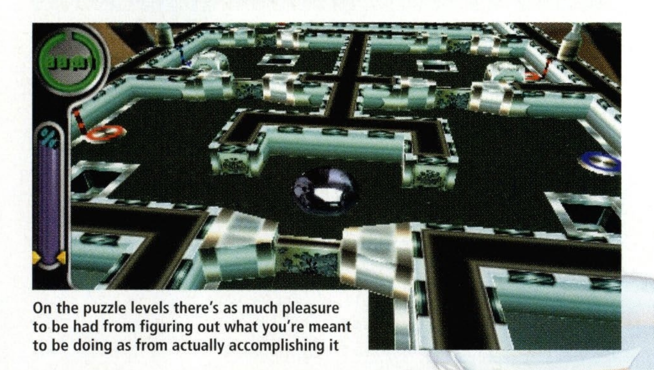


The level select hub world uses portals and symbols rather than text in an effort to make the game as easy to localise as possible



## The man with the golden cue

**Archer Maclean is one of those names that every gamer knows without necessarily knowing why. Some know exactly why, remembering with intense affection his very first game, *Dropzone* (1984), which appeared on Atari and Commodore machines as well as in the arcades. For others, his name will always be synonymous with *IK+* (1988), a beautifully balanced threeplayer fighter. Since then, his name – and that of Jimmy White – has been emblazoned on a series of pool and snooker games, starting with *Jimmy White's Snooker* in 1991. Most recently he released *Pool Paradise*, a tropical getaway which let you while away the hours with straight pool, novelty star-shaped tables and the most satisfying analogue darts game ever made. This will make a return as *Pool Paradise International* next year, complete with Xbox Live play. In 2002 Awesome Studios became part of Ignition Entertainment, which Maclean oversees alongside founders Vijay Chadha and Greg Bavertsock. As that rarest of western breeds – the developer/publisher – Ignition has recently signed a deal with THQ to publish their titles in Australia, bringing *Metal Slug* and *King of Fighters* to a fanbase previously forced to import.**



**On the puzzle levels there's as much pleasure to be had from figuring out what you're meant to be doing as from actually accomplishing it**

the much bigger development issues are running ahead of the PR machine. And they have had significant leading-edge technological issues to conquer."

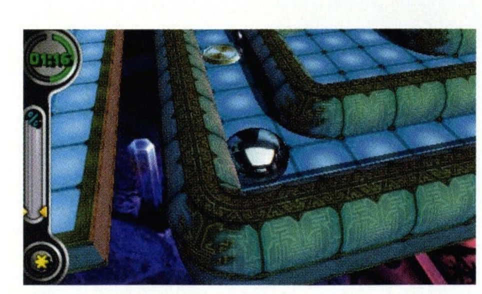
**The real potential** of the machine is still a cause for speculation. How hard is *Mercury* pushing it? "I think fairly hard. The game might look simple – you think, 'Oh, it's just a maze with a bit of liquid in it' – but when you actually look at the maths going on between the physics of the blob, how it splits and globs together, and then the 3D levels with all the texturing and lighting and dynamic shadows and suddenly technically it looks like quite a challenge. But it runs fairly fast, well, flat out at the moment, although you're not too worried about frames per second on a handheld screen."

"The game might look simple – but when you look at the maths going on suddenly technically it looks like quite a challenge"

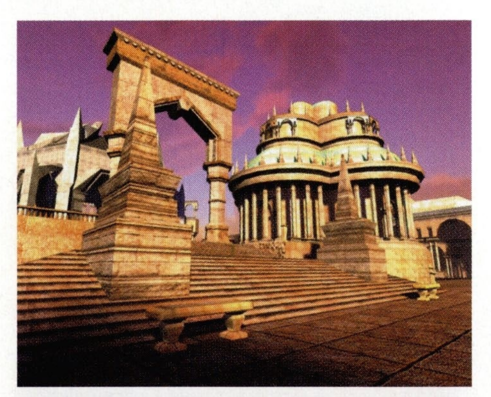
Those 3D levels also present the biggest technical challenge for the team – the camera. Intricate, multi-layered levels do not lend themselves well to fixed camera points. Programming an automatic camera for a game where the central character (it may be a faceless ball of liquid metal, but it's almost impossible not to anthropomorphise as you coax it round corners and agonise over orphaned droplets) can split into 16 pieces and run off in 16 different directions is basically impossible. How can the camera predict which one you want it to follow? The likely solution is a halfway house – a semi-automatic system which can be smoothly overridden by the player. Tilt control should leave plenty of buttons free for an intuitive system, and the console versions will work very happily with a twin stick system.

Also crucial in the few development days remaining will be the difficulty balancing. The game will offer multiple routes through to completion. There there are currently 108 levels, although not all may make the final cut, as ill-judged difficulty spikes could kill *Mercury*'s appeal. Maclean is quick to acknowledge the challenge: "That's exactly what we're working on at the moment. Those levels you played are currently in the training world but I'm probably going to push them to world two, because they're not elementary enough." Conversation soon turns to *Super Monkey Ball*'s infamous Expert Level 7 and veers past *Leisure Suit Larry* on the way to discussing new ways for games to monitor player's progress. It bodes well for *Mercury* that its makers are so easily distracted by debates on game design.

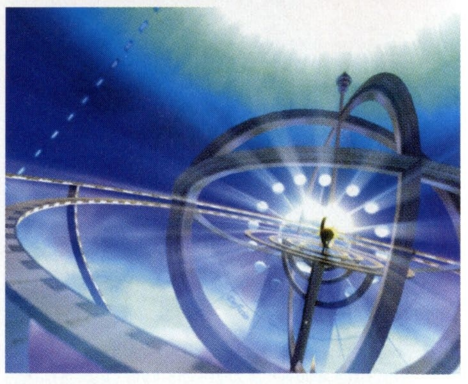
Maclean is also easily distracted by the subject of originality. "As far as we know there just aren't



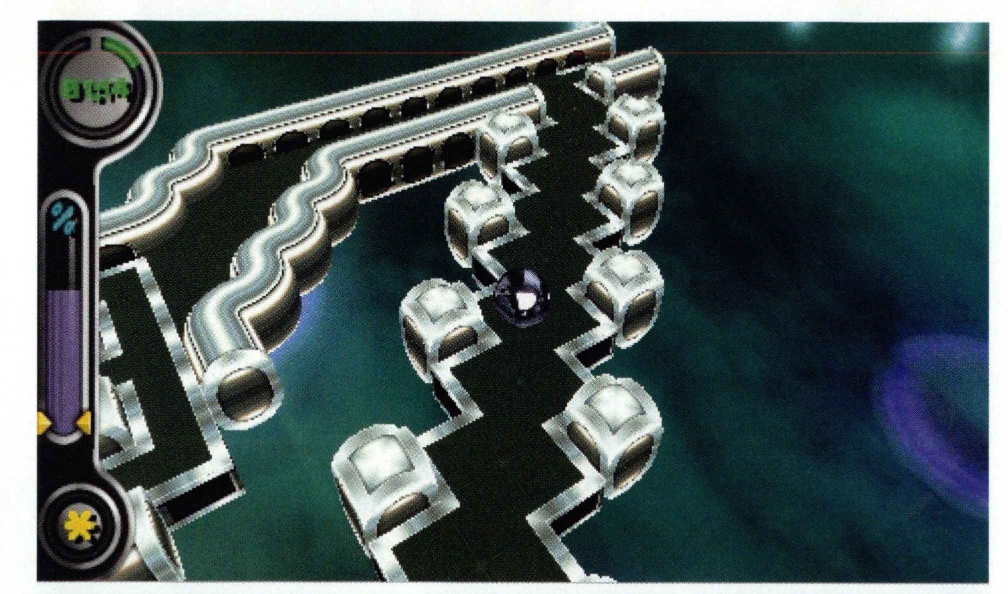
**Although screen furniture is kept to a minimum, the mercury gauge gives you an essential readout on how much metal you've spilled**

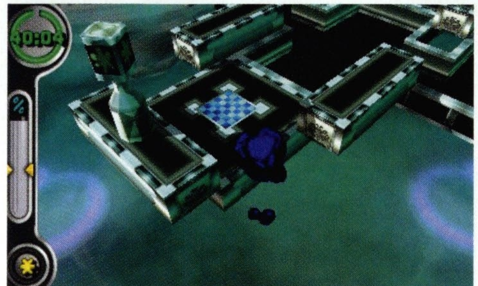


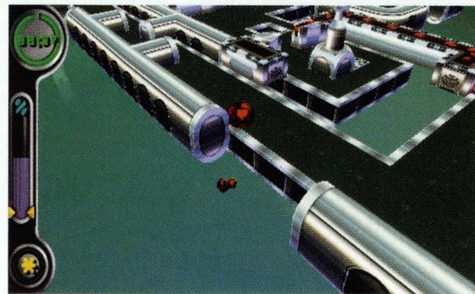




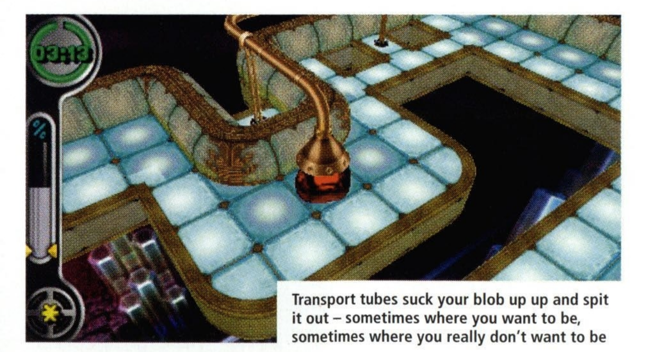
**Each of the game's six worlds has a dramatically different theme, which forms a lavish backdrop to the stark geometry of the mazes. Each will be introduced by a short – but jaw-dropping – movie, which will take full advantage of the PSP's big screen**







**One of the most appealing aspects of the game is how strongly the physics of the blob informs how you play. Tricky narrow sections can't be handled by tiptoeing – you'll need to get up some speed to tease your blob into a long thin trail, otherwise it may start to leak off the edges**



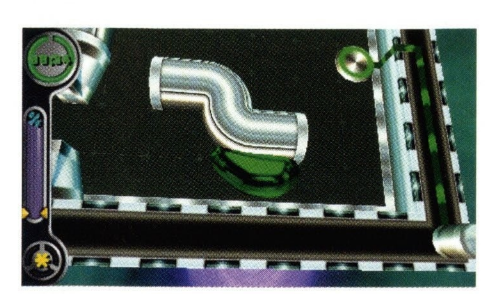
**Transport tubes suck your blob up up and spit it out – sometimes where you want to be, sometimes where you really don't want to be**

many original games coming out for the PSP launch. I think there's going to be 15 to 20 launch titles that are going to be *GT 3.5* and *Tekken 29* and there'll be one or two original titles. And I think one of the reasons that we're under the spotlight with Sony is that they recognise that their brand new piece of hardware needs a game which is a whole step beyond where everything is at the moment – something simple, something visually striking, something where it's obvious what you're supposed to do, and which isn't a sequel."

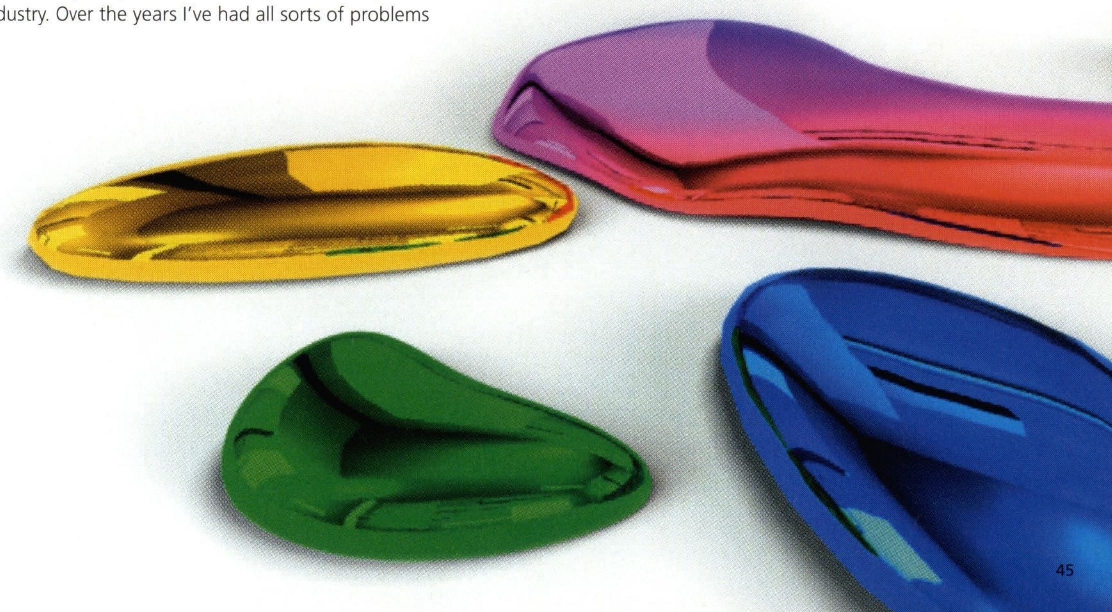
He also has an answer for why original games are currently in such short supply: management. "At E3 last year we were looking for a US distribution partner, so I was showing the game to, well, naming no names, but it was a company that's now gone bust. So I was meeting with their VP of marketing, and I asked him to sign an NDA before showing him some of the deeper stuff about how *Mercury* worked. He just folded his arms and said: 'I don't care who you are, I've been in this industry for eight whole years now and whatever game design you've thought of, I've already thought of it before you. So there's no point in getting me to sign an NDA.' I said: 'Well, I'm really sorry, but then I can't show you the game because it really is an original idea.' And he says: 'Yeah, yeah I hear that ten times a day. Trust me, you've got nothing I haven't seen before.' So I couldn't show him the game."

We wonder aloud how he resisted the temptation to lamp him. Maclean laughs: "There were other people in the room. I could have lamped him if there was no-one else there. No witnesses! The rest of the guys present were all right. They all signed the NDA and saw the game and loved it. But this guy couldn't realise that I was about to show him something that was actually unique. And that's a problem for this industry. Over the years I've had all sorts of problems with being approached by platform holders and they would say: 'You do all these snooker and pool games, can you do a sequel for us?' And yes, of course we could, but that means we're just stuck in a rut. I've done, I dunno, 14 snooker and pool titles, and God knows how many derivative versions, but we won't be doing any more." He pauses, smiles, and shakes his head. "Famous last words!"

Being stuck in a rut is a peculiarly painful situation for someone as relentlessly inventive as Maclean. "I have a million ideas a day," he jokes, before deadpanning: "You have to filter out the good one." There may be 999,999 duds (rejected notions during our interview include a solar panel charger for the PSP and a gaming handheld called The Grope), but there are developers who struggle to have one good idea per project, let alone seven a week. *Archer Maclean's Mercury*, with its irresistible premise and painstaking execution, shows real promise of being that one in a million.



**The flow of the mercury is enormously satisfying, smooshing round the obstacles as it slithers and shimmers its way around the maze**

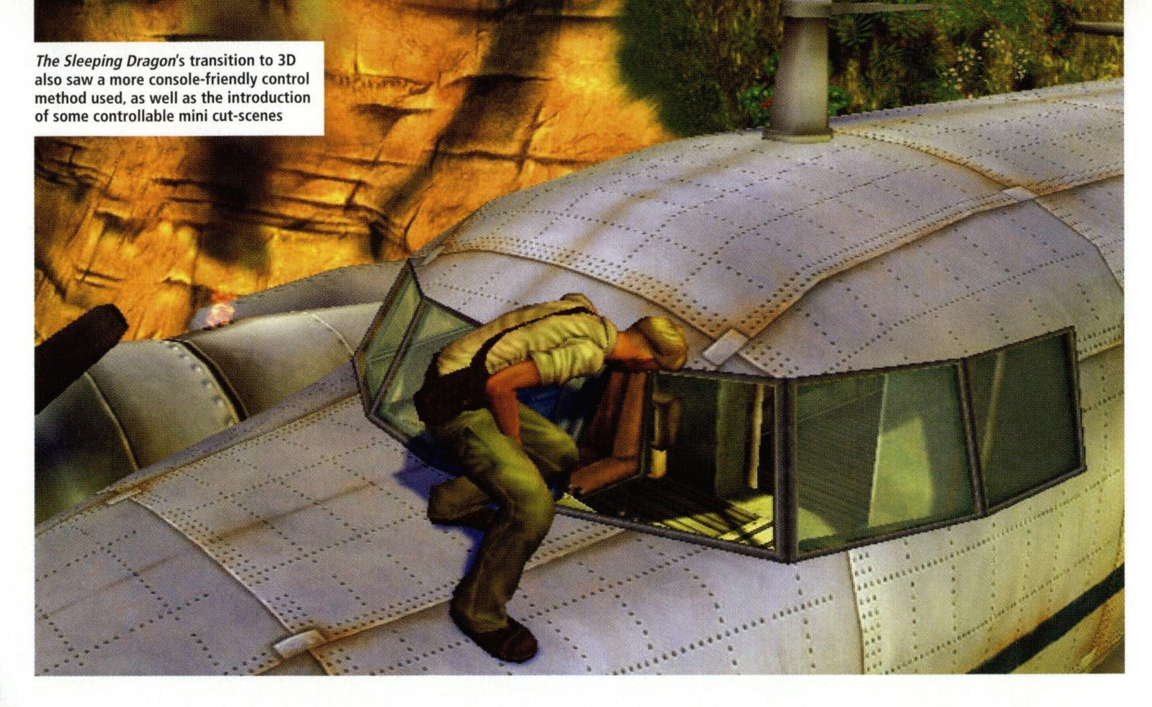


# RAIDERS THE

# OF LOST ART

## AFTER A COUPLE OF HIGH-PROFILE CANCELLATIONS, THE FUTURE OF POINT-AND-CLICK GAMING HANGS IN THE BALANCE. IS THIS THE END OF THE LINE FOR GRAPHIC ADVENTURES?

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. Many a discerning journalist heaped glowing appraisal on *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon*, hailing the 'glorious return' of adventure gaming. By successfully reinventing an adventure franchise so associated with the days of the 2D point-and-click interface, Revolution had skilfully demonstrated that the shift to three dimensions needn't necessarily equate to the death of the genre – a notion entertained by some following the *Monkey Island* series' uninspiring push into 3D. Things were looking good. Not only had Revolution delivered the shot in the arm the genre so badly needed, but work was also well underway on the sequel to one of the adventure genre's most revered titles, *Sam & Max Hit The Road*. Just as it seemed that it had left graphic adventures behind to concentrate resources on the bankability of the Star Wars licence, LucasArts had announced that it was developing *Sam And Max: Freelance Police* as well as *Full Throttle: Hell On Wheels*, another sequel based


*The Sleeping Dragon*'s transition to 3D also saw a more console-friendly control method used, as well as the introduction of some controllable mini cut-scenes

on a well-received original. *Hell On Wheels* fell by the wayside in August 2003, but in *Freelance Police* adventure enthusiasts had the reassurance they required. Sierra might no longer be around, but Revolution and LucasArts were both on board. This was it. A glorious return indeed.

By March 2004, LucasArts wanted off the train. Citing 'current marketplace realities' and 'underlying economic considerations', the company suddenly canned *Freelance Police*. From a shot in the arm to a kick in the teeth in one fell swoop. **Steve Purcell**, creator of the *Sam & Max* universe, was particularly vociferous in his reaction to the cancellation, calling it a "mystifying" and "short-sighted" move. Months down the line, he still finds it hard to accept the reasoning behind the decision: "You could have made a similar press statement when *Hit The Road* was about to come out. It was not a huge first-day seller but it somehow endures. The sequel would have been out by now and people could be enjoying it. It's still frustrating, but in light of current developments at LucasArts it's obvious that the writing was on the wall for quite some time."

Sales of *The Sleeping Dragon*, although steady, didn't exactly set the world alight. Despite an abundance of praise and critical acclaim from many quarters, the game didn't have as big an impact as predicted. Revolution had taken a few bold decisions in moving the *Broken Sword* series into 3D, such as the inclusion of *Shenmue*-style QTE events, stealth sections and block-shifting puzzles – all of which were at odds with the 'pure' adventure experience. The stealth sections, in particular, which brought a get-it-wrong-and-you're-dead element to the genre not seen since the days of Sierra, were a worrying nod to the need to appeal to a more mainstream audience. "The action elements in *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon* were intended to make the game feel dynamic and exciting while adhering to the key gameplay components of an adventure," says Revolution MD **Charles Cecil**. "In hindsight, we may have moved slightly too far from this mantra – a block in an adventure should have an absolute outcome, even if this is achieved through systemic gameplay, and in some of the stealth sections this was not the case."

Purcell understands the need to keep things fresh, fully advocating the inclusion of action elements: "I think adventure game developers are having to walk a fine line between drawing in new consumers and pleasing their core audience. Some 'hardcore' adventure gamers believe that any action elements are a breach of credibility. For me, I get bored with games easily so I like to mix it up a bit."

"Adventure game developers are having to walk a fine line between drawing in new consumers and pleasing their core audience. Some gamers believe that any action elements are a breach of credibility"

**Hopefully Revolution can** find the right balance when it comes to the sequel to *Beneath A Steel Sky*, its 1994 sci-fi point-and-click title. Still only in the early stages of development, the surprise announcement of a new *Steel Sky* title came as a huge boost to those disheartened by LucasArts' apparent abandonment of the adventure genre. Here again we have a game with the potential to please those already committed to adventure gaming while also winning around a whole new set of fans. Cecil is confident that the audience is still out there: "*Beneath A Steel Sky* still has a cult following, ten years after its release. It is a game that is fondly remembered both inside Revolution and among adventure fans. We wanted


*Sam & Max Hit The Road* is playable again on ScummVM. It can be run on PCs as well as Macs, Linux and PocketPC/Palm devices

to write a game that merged adventure with RPG, and the characters, world and setting of *Beneath A Steel Sky* suited this ambition well."

Those who missed out on the delights of the original first time around can download it for free from the Revolution website (www.revolution.co.uk), along with the company's first published adventure genre title, *Lure Of The Temptress*. Both can be played on modern machines thanks to ScummVM (head to www.scummvm.org) compatibility. It's a smart move – by advocating the downloading of some of its older adventures, Revolution is likely to build a bigger following in the run up to the new game.

"In hindsight, releasing the games as a free download in order to increase interest in a sequel would have been a brilliant marketing tactic. The reality is much less planned," says Cecil. "The games were written for hardware that is now long outdated. We really had nothing to lose by working with ScummVM and then encouraging free downloads. I have been very surprised at the level of goodwill this has caused – and baffled that other companies have been so reluctant to do the same."

Originally designed to allow modern machines to run classic LucasArts adventures such as *Day Of The Tentacle* and the *Monkey Island* series, ScummVM also allows such titles to be run on Pocket PCs, opening up a whole new audience for the genre. Featuring touch-screen technology, these machines feel like a natural home for the point-and-click adventures of old, providing a fluidity of control and ease of navigation. With one of the Nintendo DS's dual screens set to be a touchscreen, is handheld gaming the way forward for the genre? Sure enough, Nintendo has announced *Another*, a top-down adventure title with the emphasis firmly on puzzle solving using both the touchscreen and microphone. With this kind of innovation, adventure gaming could well be embarking on an exciting new journey.

Nintendo isn't the only one to get in on the act, however, as one of Sega's PSP titles has been recently confirmed as a graphic adventure. Details are scarce right now, but it's clear that new handheld technologies are seen as viable platforms for an adventure renaissance.

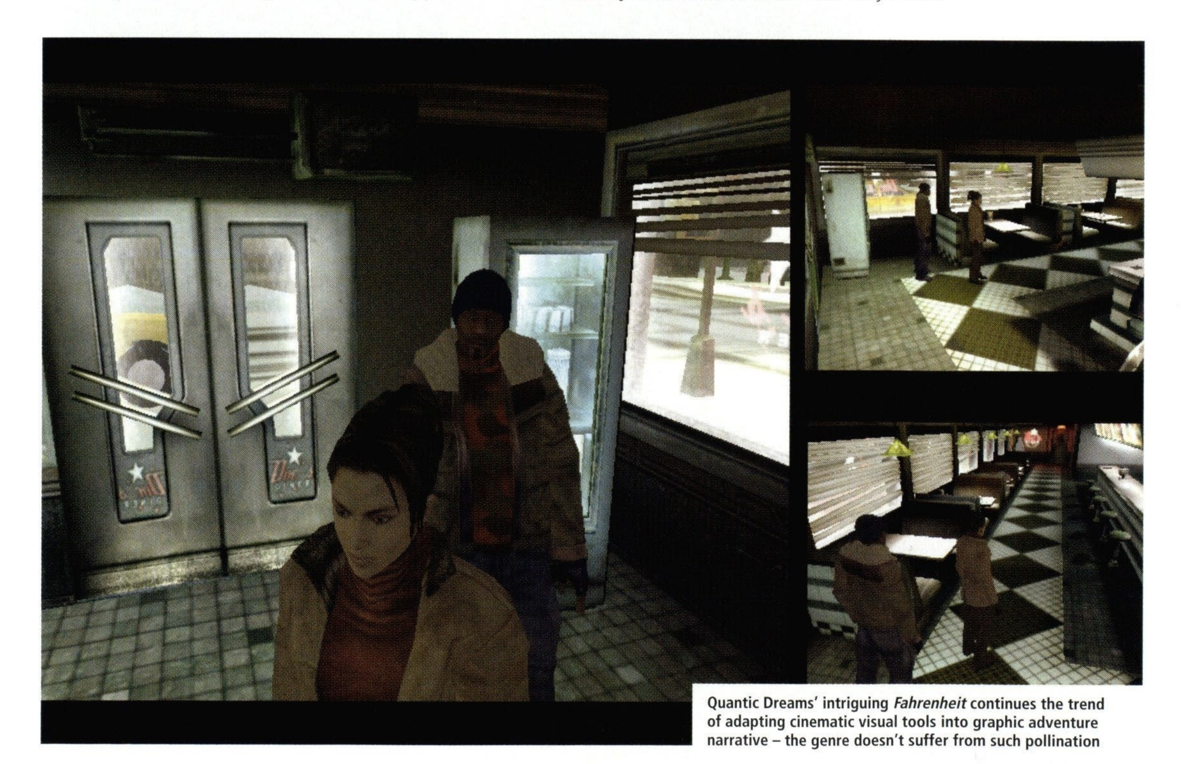
**As for the** destiny of such games for under-the-TV consoles, the outlook is not looking so fat with potential. Other than *The Sleeping Dragon* and the under-appreciated *Syberia* games from Microids, noteworthy adventure games have been hard to come by on PS2, Xbox and GameCube. A stumbling block comes with the common belief that adventure gaming became popular on the PC, so that's where its future lies.

"In many respects, adventures feel like PC games because that's how they are designed," says writer/designer **Steve Ince**, who was involved in the development of *The Sleeping Dragon*. "If they then get ported to the consoles, they can feel like a PC game that's been converted. The trick is to design the gameplay so that it works on all target platforms. When designing *The Sleeping Dragon*, we discouraged the use of PC-related terms like 'click on' and substituted 'interact with'. It may seem like a small difference, but it gets the team into a different mindset where the platform is non-specific. The gameplay becomes more independent of any interface."

It seems that Revolution is determined to make an impact on the console market. The first two *Broken Sword* titles performed relatively well on the original PlayStation despite expectations to the contrary, and *The Sleeping Dragon* is set for a Platinum release on PS2. Cecil is confident that console gamers are coming around to the appeal of the genre: "While the PC has clearly been the main host format for adventures, the success of the first two *Broken Sword* games on PlayStation proved that adventure games could succeed on consoles. I greatly regret that we didn't adapt the control system to suit the Dual Shock but, at the time, there was a very low sales expectation so the budget for the conversion was negligible."

**With the only** adventure games in production able to generate any kind of hype tending to be sequels, one point is painfully clear: companies wishing to get an original title off the ground without the comfort of existing IP are in for a bumpy ride. "Given the state of the market for adventures, it would be a real risk to create a new franchise – a risk that is greatly reduced by building on an existing property," states Cecil. "An adventure sequel is more legitimate than with other genres because the games require a new story each time, so don't simply rely on rehashing the same old gameplay with tweaks and new graphics."

It's a predicament known only too well by UK-based development team Hiding Buffalo. Having stormed their way to victory at the University of Dundee Abertay's Dare To Be Digital competition in 2002 with *Gumshoe* (www.gumshoe-online.com), a 3D detective game based in 1930s America, the five students responsible set about trying to earn a publishing deal. Two years on, the three remaining team members – **Niclas Kjellin**, **Iwan Roberts** and Tony Horne


Quantic Dreams' intriguing *Fahrenheit* continues the trend of adapting cinematic visual tools into graphic adventure narrative – the genre doesn't suffer from such pollination




*The Longest Journey* married fantastic escapism with affecting character studies of its well-realised cast, at least two of whom return in *Dreamfall*

– have been forced to change tack: "We spoke to a number of publishers about creating *Gumshoe*," explains Roberts. "Although the concept was well received, nobody was willing to gamble on funding a completely new development – especially as the adventure genre seems to be in decline and we weren't going to be using already established IP."

Faced with the choice of either borrowing a large amount of money to finance a new prototype or coming up with a new strategy, Hiding Buffalo looked into delivering episodic content through an online interface. "By using web technology we were able to develop an animated point-and-click adventure that was delivered directly to the user, therefore avoiding the need for publishers and distributors," explains Kjellin.

Once launched, the team hopes to deliver one new episode of *Gumshoe Online* per month, with each edition providing between three and five hours' worth of gameplay, depending on the difficulty of the case and the number of puzzles contained therein. It's an approach that needs a high level of coverage to be successful, but the staff at Hiding Buffalo are working hard to guarantee that once potential customers are made aware of the product, the content is there to entice them back time and time again. One such idea is to approach various crime authors for input into the game's individual cases. Although the initial batch of episodes will be mostly written by Hiding Buffalo itself, the plan is to get some recognised writing talent on board for the future. "We'd like *Gumshoe* to become a library of mysteries with a large number of writers contributing to the game," explains Roberts. "Authors would use us to either promote themselves to a wider audience or as a way to break into the games industry."

It's a terrific idea, of course, and it'll be interesting to see how recruiting star names works out. If it comes off, it could be the selling point the team needs to really get the project off the ground.

Online distribution is also the route that Telltale Games, a team built in response to the collapse of *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*, is set to take. Founded by ex-LucasArts staffers **Dan Connors**, Kevin Bruner and Troy Molander, Telltale is a company dedicated to resurrecting the kind of lively, character-driven adventures associated with the classic LucasArts era. Concentrating on both episodic delivery and a more traditional 'feature-length' approach, Telltale has a number of projects in development. One in particular comes after acquirement of the rights to an 'exciting' existing licence, and although the team are unable to reveal any specifics, the genuine enthusiasm with which they talk about the project indicates that they could well have something special in the pipeline.

"When you think about the old adventure games, and how strongly people still feel about them ten years later, it's really amazing. We have a ton of respect for that. That's what drives our company"

"Our goal is to have someone play a Telltale game and think of it as something unique and special," says Connors. "That's what drives our company. When you think about the old adventure games, and how strongly people still feel about them ten years later, it's really amazing. We have a ton of respect for that."

While the hush-hush project is undoubtedly one to keep an eye on, the smaller, episodic efforts are likely to be worth waiting for too, as Telltale aims to bring licences from well-known authors, game designers and comic books to an online audience. "We are very interested in the concept of 'episodic' games," states Connors. "However, it's important to understand the implications of that approach. Our idea is to make each game a standalone product, enjoyable in and of itself, while at the same time providing arcing storylines that will add to the depth of the experience across episodes." Connors likens Telltale's approach to that of a well-structured sitcom: you can watch and enjoy a single episode, but dedicated fans will benefit from the character development that takes place over the course of a series. "Online distribution is best for an episodic approach, allowing for a much quicker turnaround time," he says. "We want the players to see the Telltale website, and our distribution partners, as virtual TV channels where they can 'tune in' to the latest episodes and interact with their favourite characters."

Telltale Games is a company with the future of adventure gaming in its hands. With experienced staff still so passionate about the genre at the helm, anything is possible – all it needs is the support of the fans. You can lend yours by visiting www.telltalegames.com where you can keep track of the team's projects via its entertaining blog.

**It's clear that** there are people out there still dedicated enough to the graphic adventure genre to fight in its corner until the bitter end. Hopefully the audience is still there too, but patience will be rewarded. *Beneath A Steel Sky*'s sequel is unlikely to see the light of day before 2006, but in the meantime there are a handful of promising titles on the horizon. Due for release by Christmas 2005 is *Dreamfall*, the follow-up to Funcom's highly acclaimed *The Longest Journey*. Ragnar Tornquist, the main man behind both games in the series, is promising to deliver a cinematic experience to rival anything on the shelves.

Moreover, early 2005 will see the release of *Still Life* from Microids. Based on an enhanced version of the *Syberia* engine, the game will toggle between settings in modern-day Chicago and





Iwan Roberts, Tony Horne and Niclas Kjellin of Hiding Buffalo, whose *Gumshoe Online*, above, uses an episodic structure and hopes to attract professional crime-writing talent in the future

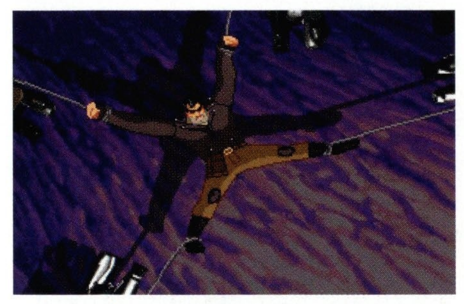
1920s Prague, concentrating on two criminal investigations with ever-increasing parallels. The plot may not win any awards for originality, but, going on previous form, *Still Life* is likely to deliver where it matters.

Digital Jesters' *The Moment Of Silence* looks set to appeal to fans of 'dark' adventure games such as Sierra's *Gabriel Knight* series or Westwood's oft-overlooked *Blade Runner*, but perhaps most promising of all is *Fahrenheit* from Quantic Dream, the studio behind the ambitious *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*. Set for release on PC and consoles in early 2005, *Fahrenheit* has the potential to turn the genre on its head.

Those who can't wait that long should take a look at some of the lower-profile adventure games released on PC in recent months. Digital Jesters' *Sherlock Holmes: The Case Of The Silver Earring*, while far from outstanding, is well worth a try, while the two *Dark Fall* titles from Jonathan Boakes should also be of interest. The games are out there, but the exposure, generally, hasn't been.

**The adventure genre** cannot be allowed to die. Catering for 'mature' gamers without the need to resort to profanity, extreme violence or naked flesh, graphic adventures offer much to an industry often accused of being childish. Providing an intellectual workout as well as grand storylines and strong characterisation, these games offer unique challenges that would be sorely missed.

On the subject of characterisation, this is also a genre that has served up some of the strongest female characterisations to date. *Monkey Island*'s Elaine Marley, *Syberia*'s Kate Walker, *Broken Sword*'s Nico Collard and *The Longest Journey*'s April Ryan simply put the likes of L. Croft to shame.



***Full Throttle*, a heavy metal adventure by Tim Schafer, was one of LucasArts' last great adventure games, and worth hunting down**

As traits of the adventure game are absorbed into other, cross-genre titles – for example, the simplified pick up/combine/use mechanic utilised in the *Resident Evil* games – the danger of the genre becoming obsolete increases. Nevertheless, there will always be a place for adventure games. After all, which other genre would offer players the chance to control a frontier pharmacist?

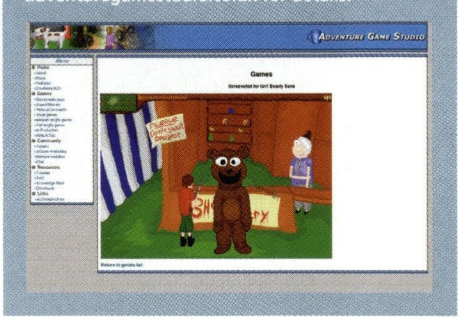
More importantly, graphic adventures are in many ways the closest the industry can claim to gripping novels or absorbing movies, a point best summed up by Purcell: "A good story involves the audience and leads them along a certain path. A good adventure should do the same thing, so that you're not just playing to finish – you're playing because you need to know what's around the bend. It's clear that running through hallways shooting at monsters, however unoriginal at this point, is still an engaging experience. The challenge is to make an adventure that is immediately engaging, suspenseful and accessible as that."

Glorious return or not, it seems the graphic adventure is not on its last legs just yet. If the enthusiasm displayed by the likes of Telltale and Revolution is matched by fans of the genre in the coming months, then the question needn't ever be posed again. It's over to you.

## DIY DEVELOPMENT

**Graphic adventure fans can try their hand at creating their own experiences thanks to a free download which goes by the name of Adventure Game Studio. Featuring a fully customisable interface, AGS allows users to produce original point-and-click games in the vein of the early Sierra and LucasArts efforts.**

**No programming experience is required to make use of AGS (a number of thorough tutorials are supplied), although scripting is available for those in the know. The website also hosts a selection of amateur adventures created using the program, so it's worth checking back from time to time to see how other users are faring. Visit the website at www.adventuregamestudio.co.uk for details.**



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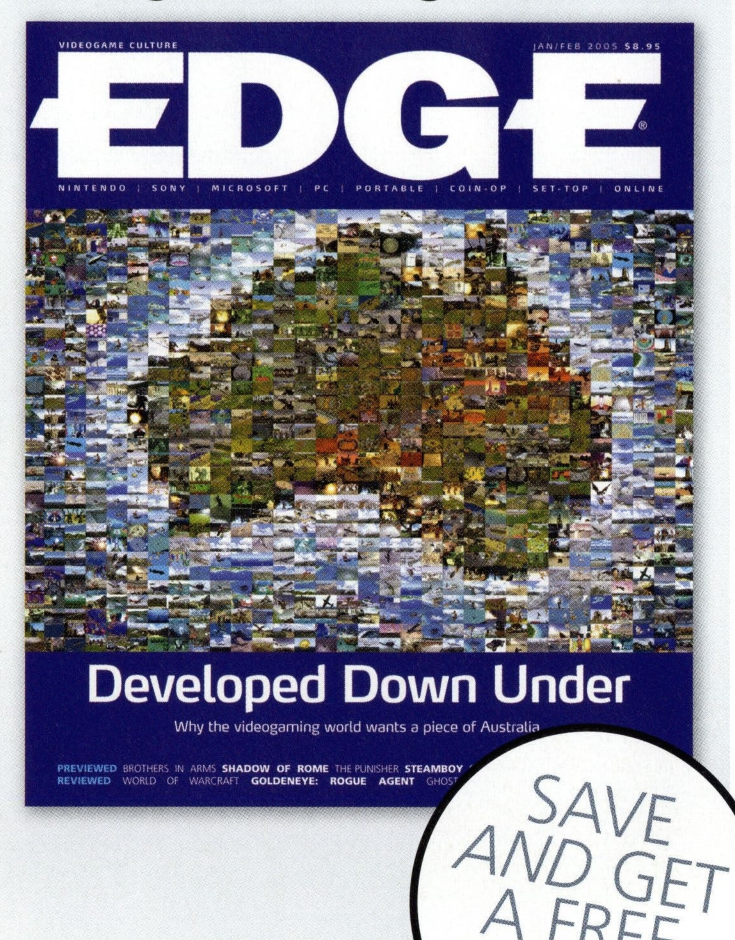
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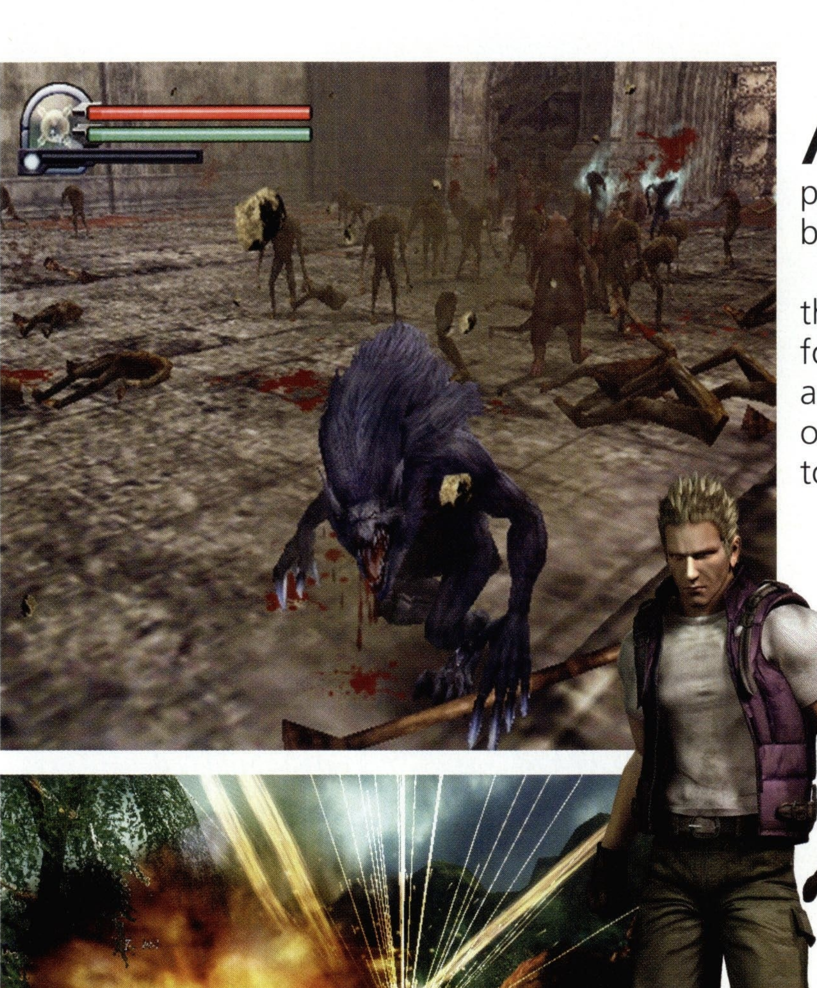



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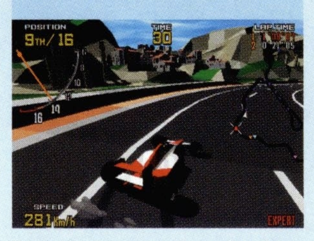

XBOX
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# Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

## Edge's most played

### Virtua Racing



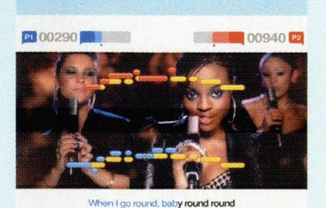
We've had to wait a long time for this arcade-perfect conversion of a groundbreaking classic. The PS2 version has three new tracks, and it's now getting a PAL release.
PS2, SEGA

### Donkey Konga




Get friends in room. Open wine. Let fun begin. The novelty of joining in with the game from across the room is irresistible, even if some of the cover versions are a bit ropey.
GC, NINTENDO

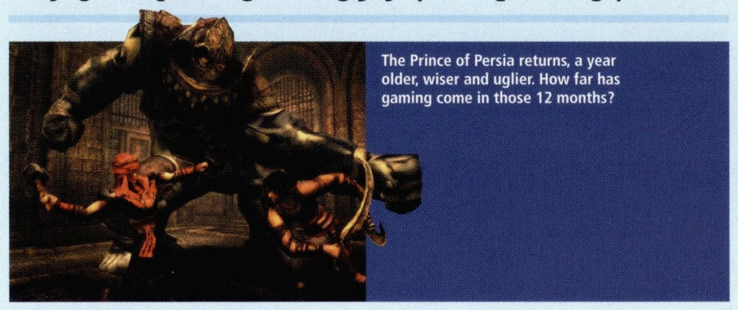
### SingStar




Get friends in room. Open wine. Initial reticence is soon overcome by the irresistible desire to join in the fun (even if some of the cover versions turn out to be a bit ropey).
PS2, SONY

## Forever young

### Why gaming has growing joys, not growing pains



The Prince of Persia returns, a year older, wiser and uglier. How far has gaming come in those 12 months?

It's videogaming's favourite excuse. 'We're a young industry!' we cry, scruffily proud of the failings this excuses – puerile content, chaotic project management, limited demographics. Commentators make earnest, pointless year-by-year comparisons to where film was when it was ten, or 15, or 20. It's a ridiculous excuse for a number of reasons, but the biggest is that it's a ticking time bomb. Will we still be falling back on it in five years? Ten years? What will happen when we hit puberty? Will gaming's balls finally drop?

But just because videogaming doesn't need to grow up doesn't mean it isn't growing. The last two years have produced an escalation of excellence which has constantly surpassed predictions. A year ago, the MMORPG was the least popular gaming genre in the western world, and now World of Warcraft has sold out in every territory it launched in. What was called by many a genre doomed to fail due to subscription fees is now a money-making machine.

A year ago, a Persian prince revolutionised our expectations about something as simple as walking. He's back, but in the meantime *Galleon*, *Ninja Gaiden* and *Spider-Man 2* have shown just how great the scope is for games to exhilarate simply by letting you move through a world. Think about that timeline for a moment. Boundaries are redefined and expectations are confounded in a matter of weeks, not months or years. From the perspective of the player, what was unthought-of in March has become a benchmark by the time May comes around.

In between those milestones, Nokia bankrolled a very public laughing-stock – the result of a newcomer taking baby steps into an industry it wasn't familiar with. Here was a situation where there was some growing-up to be done, and the N-Gage has had to do it with the world looking on. With *Pathway To Glory* there's no doubting it has reached maturity. New to gaming, Nokia has completed an entire life cycle in the time it takes to make a film.

That's how fast it's moving. Here's to Christmas 2005. 















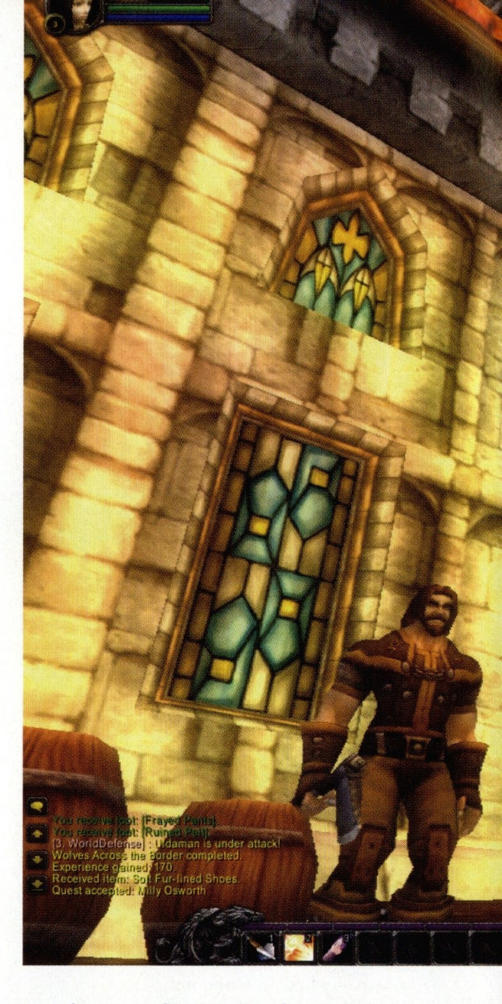

The built-in map allows players to see both continents in the game, plus it allows a more detailed look at zones, and even further detail in the city areas.



# WORLD OF WARCRAFT

**FORMAT:** PC, MAC **PRICE:** $99.95 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
**PUBLISHER:** VIVENDI **DEVELOPER:** BLIZZARD
**PREVIOUSLY IN:** E1

That subtitle is perhaps a little too aey say imitation is the height flattery, but that hardly feels the case when Blizzard works their magic on a new gaming frontier. Displaying a knack for being able to go into a gaming genre like the RPG or RTS and make it work so it has mass appeal, Blizzard have now fashioned a MMORPG that could be the one to crack a truly monstrous user base outside of Korea. What Blizzard have done to the traditional fantasy MMORPG in terms of breaking the formula is negligible, but they've streamlined the process in a manner that takes away the frustration and grind. About the only annoyances they didn't do away with are the illusion-shattering way in which monsters respawn in areas that always look the same, and the pay-to-play scheme.
Warcraft's rich backstory and existing RPG-like stats and combat mechanics work well in this genre. While the storylines are unveiled in too sporadically via text that feels too functional to truly sink in, the brutally basic plot fixation of the RTS series on the war between the Alliance and the Horde gifted the game with a PvP (player vs. player) system that makes sense.
The only choice of true consequence the player makes throughout their character's life is their race, class and appearance. Gender equality exists in the *World of Warcraft*, and all races can excel in the classes offered to them, with racial traits and bonuses being subtle enough not to steer a decision too dramatically. Blizzard has done all imaginable to take away the horrid sensation that a single decision shut a lot of doors to the player. There are nine character classes to choose from, which is further diversified with three branches of talents for each class. As *WoW* doesn't allow the player to earn enough talent points to max out more than one talent branch, it offers an alternative by creating variety within the classes, rather than simply adding more. With the ability to unlearn talents at a cost, it's never too late to reassign a character's fortes, and players don't unwittingly ruin weeks or months of hard 'work'.



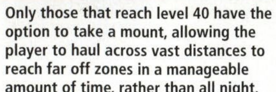


> It's never too late to reassign a character's fortes, and players don't unwittingly ruin weeks or months of hard 'work'.

Post-genesis, the first few steps into the lands of Azeroth are wondrous enough to hook much right there. Faux realism can be coldly beautiful, but it's Blizzard's artistic stylings that exaggerate the features and colours of the world and its inhabitants make *World of Warcraft* a real stunner. From vividly colourful landscapes and the denizens within, through to the ham-fisted emote animations, like the male Night Elf that does a sleek Wacko Jacko dance routine, complete with crotch grab, toe stand, kick and rapid-fire arm movements. Combat itself bears the same stilted routines MMORPGs suffer o badly from, but by animating smoothly, never pretending to appear realistic avoids an inevitable failure.

Blizzard's hard work will be transparent to MMO debutants, because the player will be too busy taking quests, and getting somewhere every play session to consider that the ability to do these two things has not always been the case in this genre. Quests offer enough experience to make





Only those that reach level 40 have the option to take a mount, allowing the player to haul across vast distances to reach far off zones in a manageable amount of time, rather than all night.






NPCs range from generic fantasy humanoids through to more eldritch entities such as this 'Ancient of Lore', one of the 'buildings' from Warcraft III.





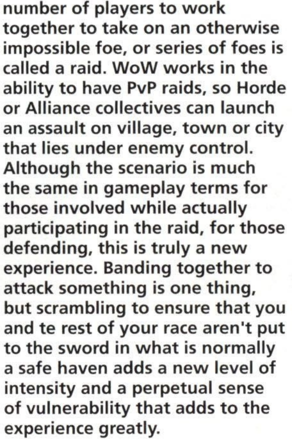




## Round-up and raid



**The act of grouping a large number of players to work together to take on an otherwise impossible foe, or series of foes is called a raid. WoW works in the ability to have PvP raids, so Horde or Alliance collectives can launch an assault on village, town or city that lies under enemy control. Although the scenario is much the same in gameplay terms for those involved while actually participating in the raid, for those defending, this is truly a new experience. Banding together to attack something is one thing, but scrambling to ensure that you and te rest of your race aren't put to the sword in what is normally a safe haven adds a new level of intensity and a perpetual sense of vulnerability that adds to the experience greatly.**



**The hunter is a different sort of MMORPG class, creating a niche for the ranged combat specialist that uses a pet (the cat) to act as its front line fighting force.**



**These two images depict WoW's alternate modes of transport. No time or effort is required to use them - meaning low level players can travel abroad.**

them a viable way to level and sometimes a choice of items, raising the chance it will be of use to the player, giving the player a constant purpose. The real trump card is that *WoW* has been geared so that soloing is viable. Not having to deal with other players of varying levels of social grace aside, the real advantage of gearing a MMOG this way is that players don't need to invest the time required to work with a group.

Naturally, it's still easier to team up with other players, and this is where Blizzard turned it up. Friends lists make it easy to stay in touch with others and the interface and ease of use for elements such as guilds and item auctions a snap. However it's the way the Horde and Alliance characters cannot communicate freely, and the way it's easy for a player to choose their level of involvement in PvP play that is *WoW's* trump card. Players who kill an enemy player more than seven levels lower than themselves acquire dishonour points, which alienate the character from their own kind. It can effectively blockade the player's trade, offering genuine incentive for power players not to discourage easy targets by slaying them out of hand.

Doing away with the more stubborn MMORPG pitfalls such as subscription fees and the occasional grind for XP to level may have been too hard an ask, but Blizzard have otherwise given this previously unpopular genre a complete overhaul. With Blizzard's knack for play-balancing, and a promise to regularly update the game (a plausible claim from a company that literally doubled its server base to reduce lag for the end user), *World of Warcraft* is destined to prove more than a flash in the pan. **[9]**







The humour of *Ratchet & Clank* games has always been consciously zany, and a little too reserved with it, but Britney Spears-a-like Courtney Gears is one of many well-fleshed lampoons. It seems the series has finally found some strong aesthetic shoes to match its technical feat





## RATCHET & CLANK 3

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E2

Unlike its predecessor, *Ratchet & Clank 3* isn't more of the same, it's less of the same. Most of the platforming gristle has been trimmed away, so there's less preoccupation with making the player double-jump through hoops, a preoccupation seemingly designed to break up the frenzy of gunplay, but, which in practice, diluted the whole experience.

Instead, what we have now is the videogame equivalent of a gun barrel: well-oiled, unwavering, single-purpose and designed to hit the player in the face with explosive force, leaving an exit wound the size of a big stupid smile. It's a thirdperson shooter that hits the ground running and firing furiously and, unlike previous *Ratchet* games, never lulls or settles down. The very first level throws you up against the kind of towering, stomping threats that previous *Ratchet* games would keep hidden until their latter stages. Obviously, Ratchet's arsenal is now even more murderously sawn-off, featuring deafening fire-and-forget hand cannons that each have their own quirks, ideal applications and brutal sound effects.

As soon as the instructive opening levels are done with, it's on to a string of strong, bedazzling set-pieces; numerous pseudo-team deathmatch skirmishes; the gladiatorial showdowns and hazardous Deathcourses of the Annihilation Station; navigating a series of tunnels that feel more like being attacked by *Frequency* than anything else. There's also what is possibly the first ever boss battle set in a pop video, as the player battles evil robobabe Courtney Gears – pulsing pink strobes, dance podiums, murderous cyborg backing dancers and all.

Weapon selection now seamlessly includes two weapon wheels instead of one, ammo can be completely replenished in a single purchase, and all the fiddly, functional gadgets – the grappling hook, the hacking tool – have been condensed into one. And then there are myriad distractions: optional side missions and endurance battles, Captain Quark's 2D Vid Comic stages, trophies and crystals to hunt, skill points and titanium bolts to earn. It's a package that feels as complete as it does technically brilliant, the product of a dev team working at its confident, relaxed and refined best.

However, Clank's solo sections – where the diminutive robot solves straightforward puzzles – are as depressingly simple and galling as they've ever been. It's also arguably a little too easy. Once you've got a few fully-powered guns to draw, there's little that the game can throw at you that can't be cut down within seconds, but those seconds are satisfying, breathtaking, intense, hyperactive, and thrilling nonetheless. It's not as acidly funny as, say, *Metal Arms* either, but it is far less frayed around the edges. It's taken two near-miss games to get here, but Insomniac has finally nailed the art of war, lock, stock and around 20 smoking barrels. **[8]**

### Ratchet & seven others



**As well as splitscreen support for four players, the game allows online battling for up to eight. In addition to standard deathmatch and capture the flag modes, teams can also attempt to capture one another's bases by taking out their defences. Strategic waypoints can be activated by using Ratchet's wrench to screw in a large bolt; it's a move that takes several seconds, and leaves you open to fire, but will result in a spawn point for your team, as well as access to vehicles, weapons and other supplies.**

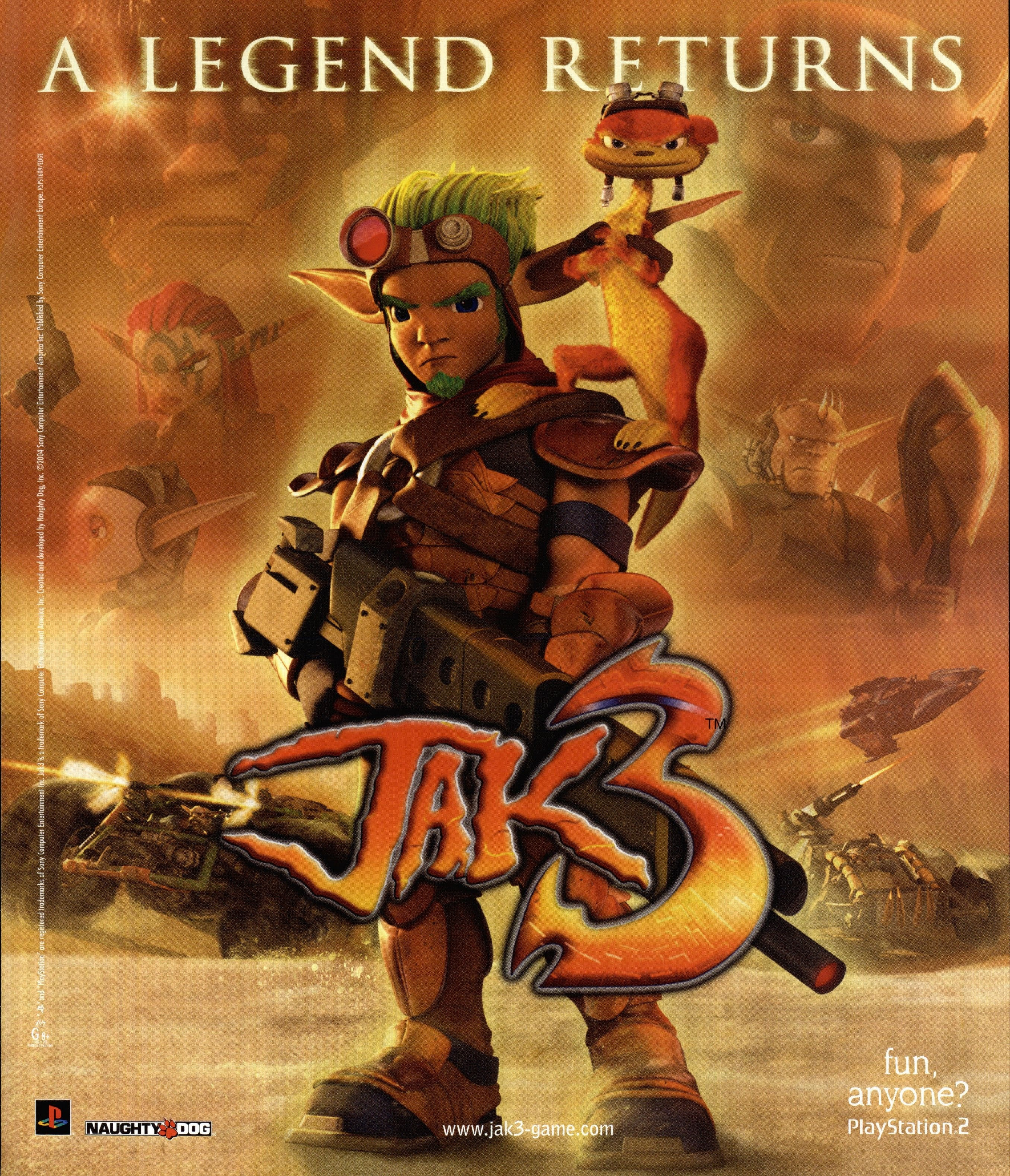


Each of your weapons can be upgraded through five levels of power with repeated use. The fifth and final level usually sees the weapon evolving significantly, with a new name and function; the sniper rifle, for example, ultimately becomes the fiercely-powerful Spitter

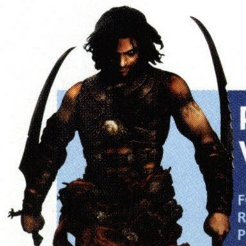
Find an alien costume, and you can breach the intergalactic language barrier, making use of rhythm action to convince sentries to allow you access to further areas of the game. Another hacking sub-game makes a return, in a typically bewildering but addictive fashion



Both twin-stick thirdperson controls and a firstperson option are now available from the off, cementing the game's core concern as an accomplished shoot 'em up



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# PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), GC, XBOX, PC PRICE: $99.95 (PC $69.95)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E3





Red. Right from the moment the Ubisoft logo dissolves into a shimmering, crimson pool, *Prince Of Persia: Warrior Within* is drenched in the colour. Torches blaze with angry, ruddy flames; the crumbling architecture is draped in claret; battles erupt in fountains of vivid gore. In a tiny but pivotal detail, the grim prince wears a scarlet sash, signifying his newly bloody intent.

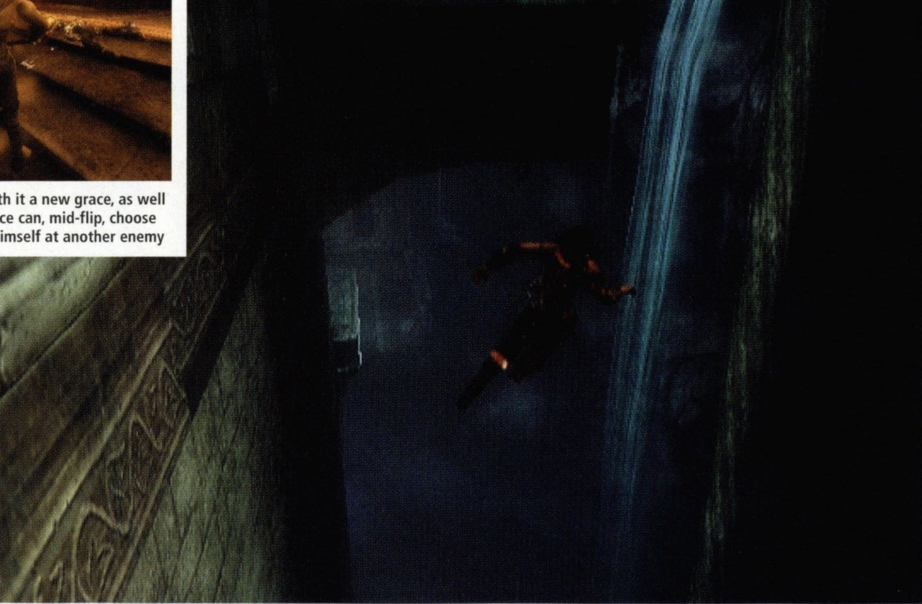
It's a stark shift from the hazy gold and deep indigo that suffused last year's inaugural remake, and symbolic of the apparently major stylistic change that has had the first game's avid fans up in arms. *The Sands Of Time* won so many hearts in part because its looks and atmosphere were like no other videogame's: dreamlike, decadent, sexual, and yes, Arabian (not to say Islamic), all perfectly encapsulated in the romantic promise of that gorgeous title screen. *Warrior Within*'s title screen is a desolate, rubble-strewn corridor. Its soundtrack is strident nu-metal. Its architecture is Gothic. Its tone is bleak, harsh, violent, and profoundly western (not to say American). It looks and sounds and feels exactly like every other videogame.

Well, no. You may well groan at the scars and the stubble and the S&M costumes, swear your way through the graceless combat tutorial that kicks the game off, and cringe at the underweight crunch of those Linkin Park riffs or the portentous cliché of the storytelling (the Prince must travel back in time to stop the sands being made, and thus avoid his own fated death). But once you're done mourning your Errol Flynn fantasies and have sunk your teeth into the red-raw meat of *Warrior Within*, you realise that under the pallid skin it resembles no other videogame so much as *The Sands Of Time*. And that can hardly be a bad thing.

The instinctive, fluid, acrobatic platforming is still there, still in copious quantities, and still a mesmerising, liberating joy. It's broken up into slightly smaller pieces, and perhaps a little less cerebral, but the admittedly minor additions (use of ropes on walls, and the ability to slide down banners,



**The combat expansion brings with it a new grace, as well as a gigantic moves list. The Prince can, mid-flip, choose to launch off a wall and propel himself at another enemy**



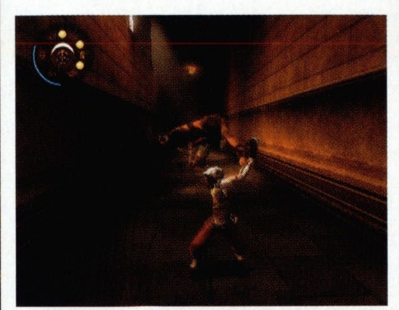


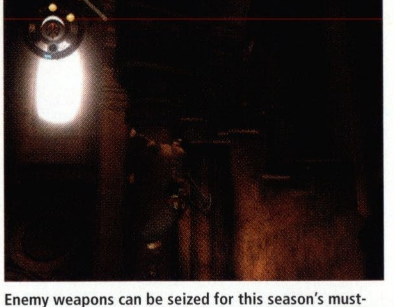
**Even though the game no longer hinges on the contrast between water and sand, a cool drink still refills your health. It won't, however, wash the grim scowl off the Prince's face**





The copious sprays of gore can be turned off. We wonder if this option will be used more to protect the innocence of children, or the sensibilities of ageing fans. We'd rather have had an opportunity to silence the Prince's inane trash-talk

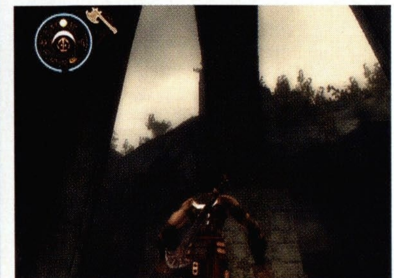




Enemy weapons can be seized for this season's must-add feature, dual wielding: it's empowering, but a little too easy to accidentally fling your off-weapon away







which some may remember from demos of *The Sands Of Time*) are welcome. The gigantic mechanical puzzles are still there, slightly undernourished, but still satisfying in their weight and symmetry. The time powers are still there, still impressive in their implementation, and still a heaven-sent revolution of the instant-death platform game (although they are now much less important in combat).

Also present and correct are the gloriously clutter-free interface with its disappearing readouts, and one of the original's greatest (if embryonic) achievements – the camera. Where virtually every other thirdperson game struggles just to show the pertinent action, *Warrior Within* not only portrays it with near-infallible clarity, but finds and seamlessly switches between dizzying long-shots and skewed, fish-eyed angles that highlight the scale, drama and daring of the Prince's adventure. This camera has art where others have mere competence at best, and it's not at the cost of player control either. There's sound technology behind this approach, but also painstaking planning, hard work and a good eye.

Perhaps most surprisingly, this is still a profoundly beautiful game, albeit more conventionally so. The architecture has genuine majesty and is in a state of convincingly organic ruin (in the present, at least). The textures of fabric, vegetation, and stone are astonishingly lifelike, and even the radiant shafts of light seem tangible. Depth of field, elevation, and the impressive size of the environments are all powerfully conveyed. But the cost, in terms of a stuttering framerate, is dear. And so to the most contentious, substantive change (and even this has been overstated): the combat. The fears – or hopes – inspired by the intense pre-release focus on this aspect of the game were largely unfounded. It does not usurp platforming's rightful place at the game's heart. The complexity implied by pages upon pages of combos with names like Furious Tempest Of Agony is entirely illusory, for these are little more than fodder for random, button-mashing spectacle. Cherry-picking from the Prince's offensive moves means the combat loses some of its instinctive precision, but brings welcome variety and undeniable satisfaction to the ceaseless skirmishing.



Once you've sunk your teeth into the red-raw meat of Warrior Within, you realise that it resembles no other videogame so much as The Sands Of Time

And ceaseless is the word. There is a lot more fighting, indeed, too much. But you are seldom ranged against more than a handful of opponents at a time, and never face the tedious, dispiriting, respawning hordes that dragged the freewheeling *Sands Of Time* to its knees. In *Warrior Within*, combat frequently punctuates the smooth acrobatic flow of the game, rather than occasionally bringing it to a choking halt. It is, overall, a considerable improvement, perhaps the only one in this sequel. The extent of the backtracking, though, is almost unforgivable in what is essentially a purely linear adventure, and feels like a cheap and unnecessary tactic for extending the game's playing time.



When retrying a section, previously unskippable cut-scenes can be fast-forwarded in a manner that's as strikingly pretty as it is convenient. It's one time power we wish more games could be bothered to master

Ubisoft has taken a flawed game of boundless promise, destroyed some (but not all) of its appeal, fixed some (but not enough) of its problems, and jeopardised the whole endeavour by making the same mistake twice and rushing it to market before it was steady on its feet. *Prince Of Persia* is strong and supple enough to survive this with many of its immense virtues intact. But it deserved so much better. **[7]**



# GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: $69.95 (PS2, XBOX $89.95) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E1

"Going where no previous James Bond game has dared to tread," says the press release. "*GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* (...) breaks all the rules by transporting players to the dark side of the Bond universe to experience life as a high-rolling, cold-hearted villain." It's a redundant, utterly wasted twist. For all the difference it makes in terms of the play experience – which sees you on Goldfinger's payroll against Dr No's empire of evil – it may as well be business as usual. The real development, the brave development, would have been to have you face off against MI6, against the 'good guys'. But EA doesn't do risqué, of course.

It's difficult not to be cynical about *Rogue Agent* because so much of the game has clearly been constructed in a calculated fashion, as though a short-sighted marketing department was placed in charge of design. From the very opening moments, the game shamelessly borrows elements of past successful firstperson shooters (in this particular case, *Halo*'s in-game realtime y-axis preference settings, though you'll soon note Bungie's novel energy system has also clearly impressed EA's minions). Then there's the name and the preposterous association – the fact your character has a surgically implanted 'golden eye' – with one of the finest FPS titles ever created, whose lofty standing among videogamers EA is blatantly assuming will help boost *Rogue Agent*'s profile.

Still, the prosthetic organ does at least allow for the game's only real distinct element. Upgraded alongside your progress, it endows your character with gameplay enhancements such as x-ray vision, EMP pulses (to disable weapons or remote hack machinery), and shield or magnetic field disruption (think telekinetic displacement). How well these work in practice is mostly a matter of personal preference; – certainly their diversity makes it possible for players to adopt individual strategies depending on play style. What it won't do is hide the limited and predictable behaviour of the enemies; the way the action is organised into set-pieces with every attack pre-scripted, thus destroying the possibility for organic play; or the fact other than on the rarest of occasions, levels tend to be excessively long, linear, repetitive and, though set in suitably internationally varied locations, clichéd.

And yet, moments of tension exist. There is some enjoyment to be had from crouching behind a crate and picking off the opposition through a relentless hail of bullets, or working out one of the many opportunities the game gives you for conveniently utilising the environment against the opposition, or throwing a guard over the side of the Hoover Dam once you're done using his body as a shield. But nothing that you haven't necessarily been able to do in countless other FPSs, of course. And that's the problem. *Rogue Agent* is the result of design by committee: a safe, reasonably accomplished but uninspiring offering which neither excels nor progresses its genre in any way. **[5]**

## Players galore



**_Rogue Agent_ offers splitscreen fourplayer, system link and Live multiplayer opportunities. The action is suitably energetic and in addition to levels found in the singleplayer game, other locations make an appearance (such as the pyramids, Atlantis and a selection from the Moonraker set). As in the main game, certain aspects of the environment are interactive (eg the trapdoors on the Golden Gate Bridge map) which throw an additional element into the otherwise arsenal-fixated mix. Play options include limited variations on the deathmatch theme and, while unlikely to save _Rogue Agent_ from mediocrity, they do provide an enjoyable diversion to the main game.**



While you're rewarded for 'perfect shots' (head hits), the excessive innacuracy of some of the weapons makes this something of a lottery. It also ensures you waste a phenomenal amount of bullets



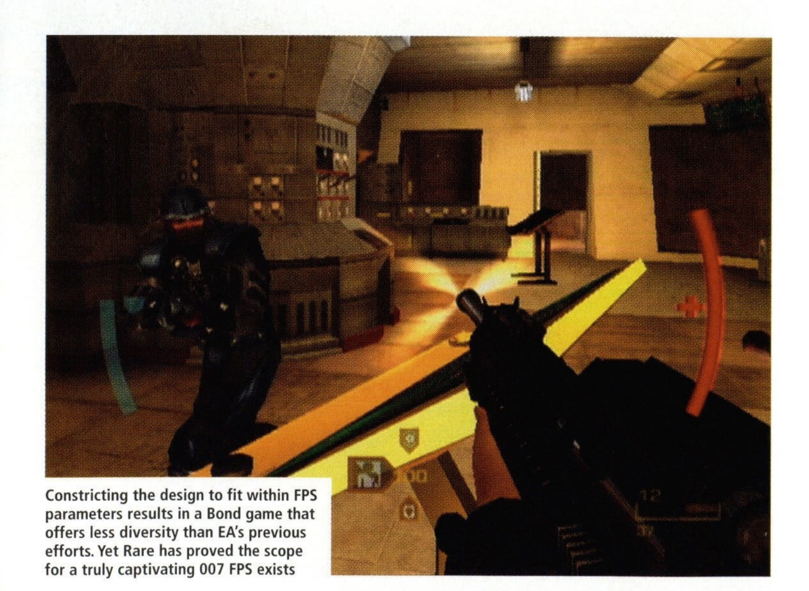
In the interest of balance each of your golden eye's combat properties (above) runs on a limited energy supply and functions for either a handful of seconds or a couple of uses. The gauge replenishes whenever your eye is not activated



The dual weapon system allows players to wield an arsenal that best suits their tactics. Larger examples such as the assault and sniper rifles, railgun or rocket launcher require the use of both hands



Enemies are predictable but remain ruthless – grab one of them to use as a shield and they'll carry on shooting



Constricting the design to fit within FPS parameters results in a Bond game that offers less diversity than EA's previous efforts. Yet Rare has proved the scope for a truly captivating 007 FPS exists



# TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON 2

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E2



Everyone remembers their first online *Ghost Recon* experience. Whether it was executing a precise head-shot at over 200 yards while crouched in a shrub or madly charging through the corridors of the training map with an M16, it was Xbox Live's first triumph, and for many, their inaugural introduction to the singular charms of online multiplayer gaming. But just a couple of months after release something odd happened. People started getting mean.

Coming up against obsessives who knew every square inch of every map was one thing, but there were also those who exploited bugs in the game to their advantage. In the online space spoiling others' fun to gain cheap victories is common, but what *Ghost Recon* couldn't do was compensate those with a will to learn with an engaging singleplayer campaign – and it's here where *Ghost Recon 2* outclasses the original.

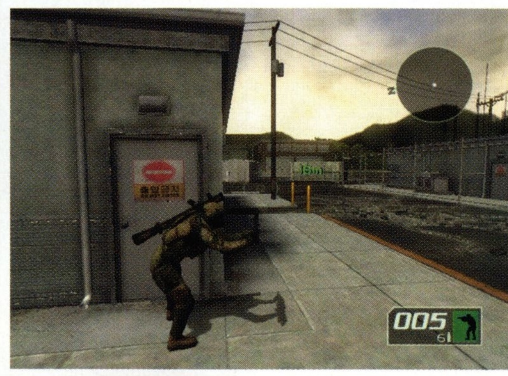
It's North Korea in the near future, and a military coup has destabilised the country and precipitated a famine. Enter the Ghost squad, a crack US military team that works alongside international forces to rid the world of despots and terrorist threats. While the politics are dodgy and the cut-scenes glib, the missions are at least varied and the locales picturesque.

Indeed, the barren *Ghost Recon* universe has been considerably enhanced. Gone are the shuffling zombies from the original game replaced with enemies that run, retreat, take cover, charge when you're vulnerable and generally act in a believable manner.

**Tanks and APCs are not nearly as terrifying as they look. Their movements are pre-scripted and once nearby troops have been eliminated a rocket or bomb is enough to take them out**



**In Lone Wolf mode you must complete the campaign without the help of squad members. However, you are given the nifty M29 assault rifle – an invention that lets you shoot round corners and zoom in on the enemy**



The spell might not be totally convincing on the normal difficulty setting, but turn it up to hard and you're in for a very challenging and energetic campaign. Yet it's bemusing to discover that you're able to quicksave at any point during a mission, a short-sighted design decision that encourages players to exit into a menu every few seconds. Three or four saves per mission, or checkpoints, would have made the thrill of victory far more intense without invoking infuriation.

Red Storm has also introduced Havok-powered physics into these new battle arenas, but it's not as complete or convincing as we'd hoped. Vehicles still trundle around on pre-ordained paths, and while a rocket might explode into one, transforming it into a twisted metal sculpture, it'll remain rooted to the spot. Gun emplacements are also a new addition (activated by pressing in the left analogue stick) and are useful for taking out rogue helicopters or streams of enemy soldiers advancing on your position. But such toys have been a staple of other war games for years. It's *Ghost Recon 2*'s precision and detail that lifts it above the raft of mediocre combat titles out there. From accurate fire rates to authentic hand signals used to issue commands, it oozes care and research.

Unquestionably, *Ghost Recon 2* is a more well-rounded and intense experience than before, but despite some beautiful locations and powerful sound effects it still errs on the side of cold simulation rather than an emotional and dramatic war experience. But that's exactly what some people want. **[7]**



**Ammo boxes will re-stock every weapon you have and it's now possible to pick up the guns dropped by dead soldiers. Wasting your rockets is not advised as they're often required to take out objective-specific targets**

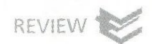
## Live a little



**At the time of writing, the *Ghost Recon 2* lobbies are not jammed enough for us to give you a comprehensive appraisal of the multiplayer experience. However, the original game's atrocious menus, Friends options and voice communication problems have been considerably improved while the new maps are even better. In online co-op it's possible to play standard missions or defend bases from streams of enemies converging on your position, making for very tense encounters. Given both Red Storm and Ubisoft's commitment and expertise in the online arena, we fully expect *Ghost Recon 2* to eclipse the excellence of the series' first Xbox Live enabled title.**

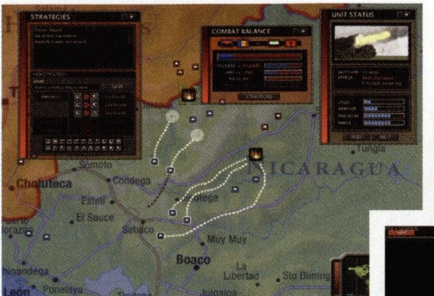


**If any of your team go down in a battle you have a few seconds to administer medical aid to them. Simply get close, then press in the left analogue stick to heal their wounds. You do leave yourself open to attack while doing this, however**



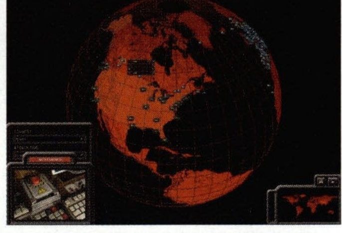
# SUPERPOWER 2

FORMAT: PC PRICE: $49.95
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: QV SOFTWARE
DEVELOPER: GOLEM LABS









The globe can be saturated with different colour schemes to aid you in comprehending the information overload from Superpower 2. Here, the planet appears to be soaked in the blood of your enemies.

Cold, calculating, and ambitious geopolitical simulations don't come along every day. There are reasons for this: they tend to be sterile exercises in number crunching, they have little mass-market appeal, and it's all too easy to screw them up. While *Superpower 2* isn't exactly a rout, anyone without a strong strategy bent will find it makes the dreary *Civ 3* endgame look animated by comparison.

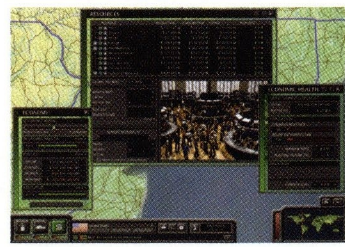
The sterile, finicky, astoundingly detailed interface hints at why *Harpoon IV* bit the dust, and why *Master Of Orion 3* should have been aborted. Each action is actualised from either itsy-bitsy menus, tiny tabs or micro-buttons. Reams of statistics live inside arcane menus; they can be super-imposed upon the globe, but this overwhelming complexity affects every aspect of the game experience.

Anal attention to detail over the finest geographical nuances sits at odds with some oddball assumptions about economics and the motivations of world powers. Naval forces are underpowered, and unusable for military transport or blockades.

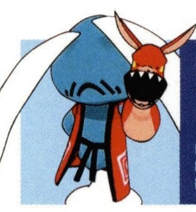
Where it does pick up some spark of strategic currency is in the scenario challenges, even if these tasks are laughably ambitious in the real world. Turkey might be able to con its way into the EU, but can France really shake off decades of socialist atrophy? Does Canada have the balls to conduct a nuclear test? Would a new and improved USSR be a good idea for anyone at all? Thanks to some loose parameters in *Superpower 2*, the answer could well be yes.

In isolation, this is one dry game. With online multi-player, we get the chance for some real rivalry in real time. Unfortunately, even at a budget price this game feels incomplete. **[5]**





Buy! Sell! Put your most outrageous economic theories to the test, and see exactly how far you get in the 'real' world.



# UNDER THE SKIN

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $79.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: PRODUCTION STUDIO 4
PREVIOUSLY IN: E1

Capcom may be notorious for its sequels, but in 1999 it set up Production Studio 4 to focus on creating original titles. So far the fruits have been mixed, with the startling *Viewtiful Joe* and the flawed *PN 03* preparing the way for this latest rainbow-coloured assault on the eyes. In singleplayer, that assault is as dazzling as it is brief, but *Under The Skin* is designed for company. The focus is firmly on twoplayer chaos, with the singleplayer mode acting as little more than a tutorial with bots.

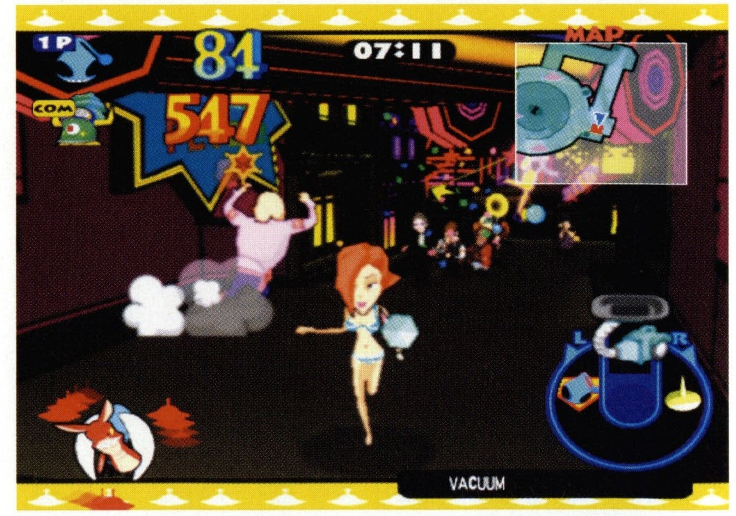
You play as mischievous space invader Cosmi, charged with the task of creating ham-fisted havoc on Earth. This jumpstarts a frantic cycle of stealing an earthling's appearance, unleashing T-Rexes and boxing gloves in order to scare coins from the locals' pockets, and then scarpering before the enraged crowd beats you into a more recognisably alien shape. But 'frantic' here is not videogame code for 'clumsy and shallow'. Thanks to the combo effects of items, there's surprising scope for cunning and strategy while dodging the custard pies and impromptu karaoke.

Combined with the presence of your opponents – up to the same tricks you are – you'll need to adapt your policy of hunting, fleeing and cooperating on the run as each level reveals its well-thought-out idiosyncrasies. Presented with the visual wit that was Joe's viewtiful hallmark, *Under The Skin* represents that rare achievement: a game whose aesthetics perfectly match the tone and style of its gameplay.

While all this jokeshop mayhem is entertaining enough, it's compromised by a whoopee cushion of a camera. It's erratic, and requires continual tweaking to keep it pointing in the same direction you are. It's not a fatal flaw, but one that constantly distracts in a game that requires your brain to turn on a dozen dimes a minute. Nitpicking aside, *Under The Skin*'s unpretentious and innovative gameplay is like a bucket of water perched atop a doorframe: surprising at first, but highly refreshing. But the nature of all jokes, even the good ones, is that they wear thin sooner than you'd like. **[6]**




Each level has its own unique Panic Time event, which adds intricacy to the game's general pandemonium. On the nautical Big Booty Bay level, pirates shower the arena with cannonballs

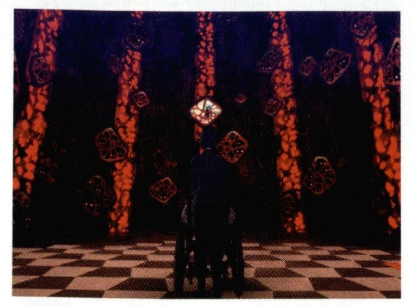



Much of Under The Skin's fun comes from using items to unmask your alien rival and steal their coins. One hit reduces them to their underwear, and a second will expose their ET lineage. Hilarious wars of prankish attrition usually follow as players' thirst for revenge takes over from more rational strategic impulses



# SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: NOCTURNE

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: US$50 (A$27) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (AU)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS USA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (ATLUS R&D 1)






The imposing interiors, bleached with ghostly filter effects, are as unique and striking as the character design

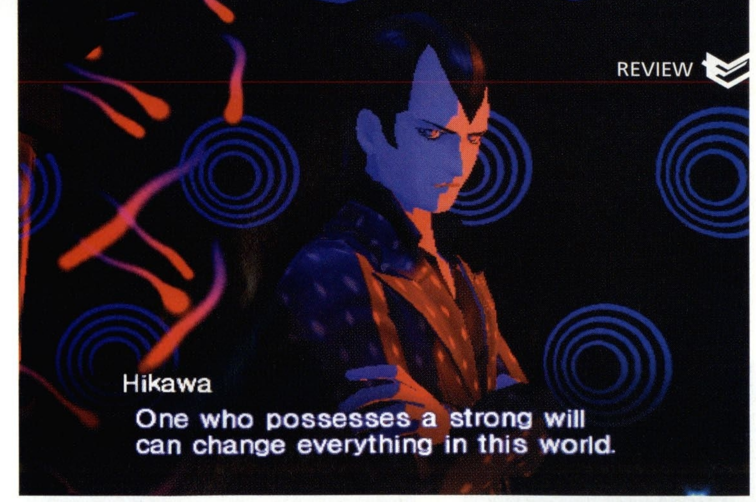
Twenty minutes into *Nocturne*, the world ends. It's indicative of the game's unique atmosphere that this is most memorable for having a fellow human being to hold your hand, though not to fully explain your role in the glacially cool afterlife that follows.

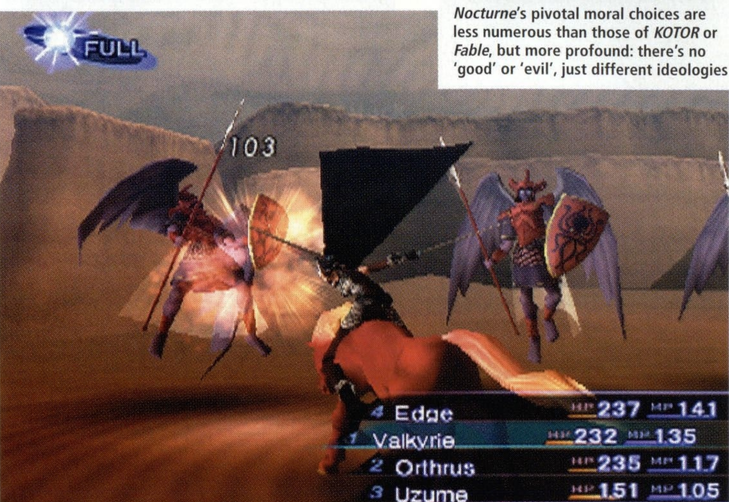
You're reborn alone in a world of Zen garden deserts, fractured moments of Tokyo cityscape and demons – nearly all of whom are prospective companions as well as enemies. Once recruited, seduced or bribed into the party they can evolve alongside you or be crossbred with others to leap up the demon hierarchy: *Pokémon* with Tarot cards.

Though its looks and theme are (post)modern, the game itself is as classic as its mythological influences or the series' lengthy history: a mantra of grid-based dungeon crawls and relentless random encounters. Their frequency is a necessary evil to develop your party and audition new members – and nearly excused from exasperation by smart combat mechanics that drastically cut downtime when using effective tactics. Scoring critical hits or using attacks that exploit an opponent's weakness earn extra actions; conversely, misses or attacks resisted by an opponent's strengths deduct them. Battles then become a tug-of-war for the chance to press an advantage, not a politely-disciplined exchange of blows.




Your allies can learn new skills, but the most customisable demon of all is your character, able to adapt to any kind of physical, magical or supporting role




*Nocturne*'s pivotal moral choices are less numerous than those of *KOTOR* or *Fable*, but more profound: there's no 'good' or 'evil', just different ideologies

Even so, this can't help the constant war of attrition overstaying its welcome in *Nocturne*'s eerier moments, where the effect is of channel-surfing between frozen dread and frenzied action, nor in the marathon dungeons of the second half, where each encounter inexorably chips – or occasionally gouges – away at your chances of overcoming the resident boss.

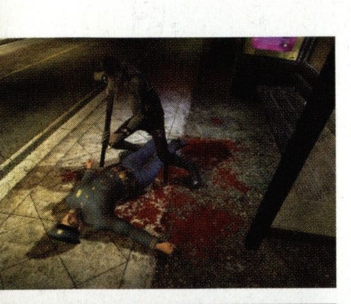
Not that the bosses require that much assistance, as many can destroy an unprepared party in a single disastrous turn. Such spirit-crushing defeats are made more bearable by the method required to respond to them: recruiting new demonic blood is often the answer rather than power-levelling, ensuring your character and party never lock into a one-strategy groove.

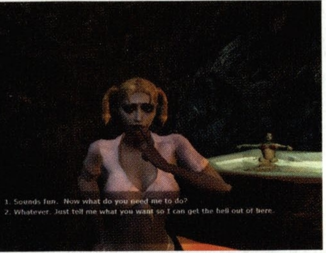
In this respect, *Nocturne* is as progressive and thoughtful as Nippon Ichi's strategy masterclasses. It's an introspective RPG not just in theme, but in the outlay of time and thought it asks of the player to make sense of what's otherwise a cosmically unfair challenge. It's a work of art, but one on such a dauntingly high pillar that only the most dedicated will appreciate it to the full. **[7]**

## Maniacs street preachers



**The US release includes the *Japanese Maniacs* expansion, adding a new super-dungeon and extra boss showdowns. The first of these bosses provides a rude awakening to the brutality of the game's combat system, proving near-insurmountable to a first-time party, but further *Maniacs* bosses are both optional and slightly less ruthless. *Devil May Cry* fans may be saddened to note that the guest-appearing Dante is, in comparison, a pushover – if a scenery-chewing, exhilaratingly showy one.**






**Players wade through far more dialogue than enemies in Bloodlines, which isn't a bad thing in a game that boasts such a well scripted tale.**



# VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES

FORMAT: PC PRICE: $89.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TROIKA



Constructed using Valve Software's Source engine, Troika's *Bloodlines* is a glimpse into a new era of firstperson role-playing games. The odd stumble is inevitable when you're exploring new ground, but the payoff here is an engrossing adventure that succeeds more than it fails. A few game stopping bugs, visual glitches and some rather clunky combat may haunt your brief existence as a Vampire fledgling, but you'll be hanging on every word that drips from the cast of this freakshow to the very end.

*Vampire The Masquerade* has existed for over a decade in pen and paper RPG format, so this isn't just a regurgitation of Hammer House horror style spooks and ghouls. *Bloodlines* carefully handles the fiction of a modern day vampire society that operates away from the prying eyes of mere mortals. Upholding the 'masquerade' is one of the most important rules in this society, as were mortals to discover their existence, vampires would have a hard time dealing with the millions of armed hunters that would rally to cleanse the planet. You begin *Bloodlines* as a freshly sired vampire, inadvertently drawn into a world you never knew existed but now must help save from possible 'Gehenna', the vampire term for apocalypse.

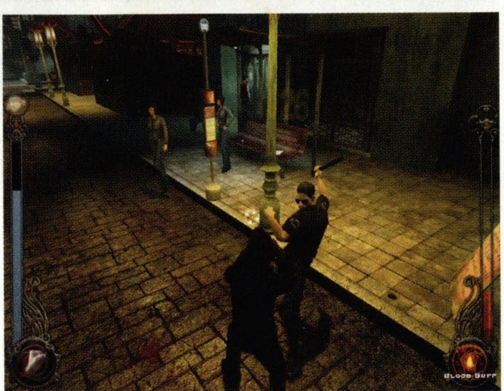





## Everyone starts as a clueless fledgling, but by the end of the game, players could be as Count Dracula to Count Blackula, or Graf Orlok to Lestat

The world of Bloodlines features a collection of very different vampire clans, one of which you must choose in order to determine the style of play you seek. For example, the Nosferatu are so hideous they remain hidden from mortals at all times and must rely on stealth, computer hacking and sly negotiation to achieve their goals, and in stark contrast, the Toreador are beautiful, seductive, and can operate amongst humans without drawing unnecessary attention to themselves. Then there are the brutal Brujah and Gangrel, amongst other vampire clans, that make character creation in Bloodlines a delicious decision that has far reaching consequences across the whole course of the game. Everyone starts as a clueless fledgling, but by the end of the game, players could be as different as Count Dracula to Count Blackula, or Graf Orlok to Lestat.

It's this character development - as well as the superb cast of NPCs that help or hinder you on your journey - that is the most impressive aspect to this RPG. The interaction and dialogue you engage in is not only affected by your stats (there are feats for Intimidation, Haggle, Seduction and Persuasion) but also by your clan (the Malkavian talk in insane riddles, for instance) and of course, whatever mood you're in at the time. Are you naughty or nice? This wild combination of determining factors produces some of the best player-to-NPC dialogue (and voice acting) in years, which is made even more impressive by how important your dialogue choices are to the outcome of your encounters, be it access to a new sub-quest, unfortunate consequences for other characters, gifts or unexpected ire. Even the way you tackle certain objectives can affect how the game's characters perceive you. It must also be said, that with their Source-inspired facial expressions, Bloodlines' intricate and emotive NPCs have enough





**Although some gothic architecture is mandatory, it cannot be said that Bloodlines fails to fashion a variety of interesting environments. Contemporary vampire stories require contemporary settings.**

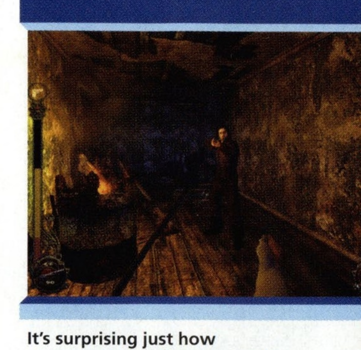




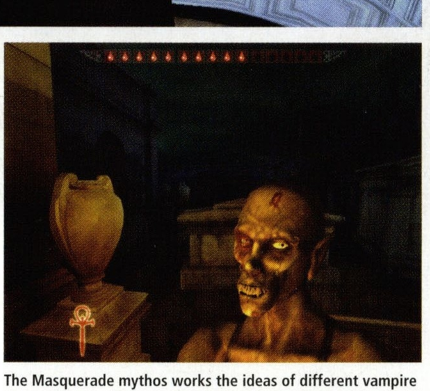




## Roll Out The Barrels



**It's surprising just how uninterested Troika apparently were to utilise the Source engine's startling gameworld physics. Whilst chairs, barrels and the odd broken object can be lifted and thrown across the room, there's never any practical reason to do so other than to vent frustration at a piece of furniture that's blocking your access to a computer terminal. Aside from removing planks of wood in order to bypass crawl spaces, the physics engine is left to rot with the piles of undead you'll leave behind in your quest. If somehow integrated into the combat, physics puzzles would have helped to enliven Bloodline's fairly repetitive action. C'mon, we all know how much gamers love collapsing walls of tumbling, flaming barrels...**



**The Masquerade mythos works the ideas of different vampire clans all having their own particular physical and psychologial traits - with varying levels of apparent humanity.**

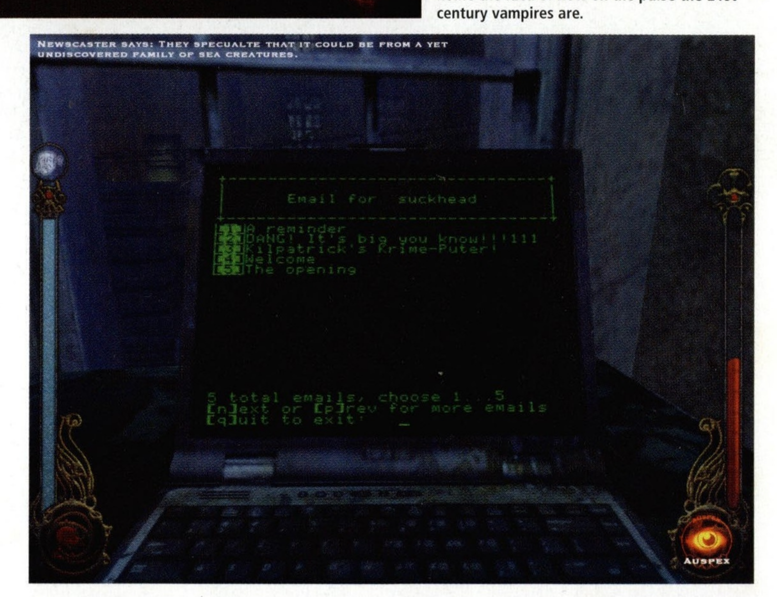
personality to leave you cackling with glee, or hiding under your bedcovers.

But for all the depth of its role-playing, *Bloodlines* suffers from shallow combat mechanics that almost completely derail the experience by the final few action-heavy levels. If you've played through most of *Bloodlines* with brain not brawn, the game becomes increasingly more frustrating as you become shoe-horned into endless action set-pieces that your character might not be equipped to fully deal with, without endless sneaking and re-loading after failed face-offs. It's made worse by how buggy the combat feels, from enemies getting stuck in mid-air to the button-mash of melee combat as you pray that your vampire's animations are the first to engage. None of this is helped by the truly 'undead' enemy AI.

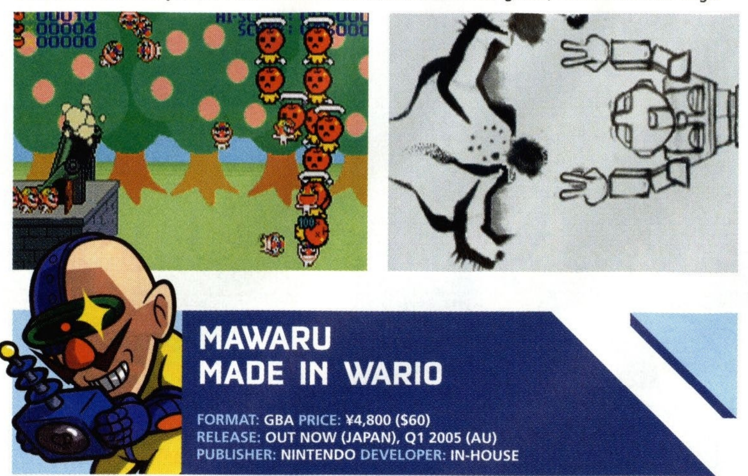
Any game that makes it to retail should also have had any crash-to-desktop bugs well and truly exterminated, and yet *Bloodlines* has more than one of these terminal hiccups fresh out of the box. Suspicions that the game wasn't quite finished when sent off to be mastered are given much more weight by just how many spelling errors and grammatical mistakes litter the subtitles and dialogue boxes, especially in the latter half of the game, when you can almost hear the dev team straining to get the code out the door. And yet, for all these failures, *Bloodlines* remains a fascinating and addictive role-playing game, because it does the role-playing part of the equation so very well – in fact, masterfully.

Even if you're dying to play *Bloodlines*, it's a title worth waiting to be patched before picking up to ensure the experience is memorable for the right reasons. **[7]**

**Nothing too complicated, but Bloodlines works in some terminal use to really ram home the idea of how on the pulse the 21st century vampires are.**



As is traditional, all the games – even the nose-poking boss battle – become available as high score endurance tests once you've beaten them. Also included are bonus minigames, which last a little longer



## MAWARU
## MADE IN WARIO

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: ¥4,800 ($60)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), Q1 2005 (AU)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It's all about the games?', that's the handheld mantra at the moment. As old masters and new pretenders enter the arena with strange new bits of kit, it's the hope most often voiced by cautious game fans and the smarmy reassurance most often trotted out by marketing execs. The new *Made In Wario*, which takes the raw gaming essence of the first game and adds the new twist of a motion-sensitive cartridge, ought to be the perfect expression of that mantra. But instead, what *Mawaru* proves is that it's all about the everything.

It's all about the aesthetics: the packaging, which is a masterclass in both branding and detailed, affectionate artistry. The presentation of the game, a ramshackle absurdity of 8bit nostalgia, Woman's Own photo montage, deranged scribbles and creamy 2D illustrations which work together to give the game as coherent a visual identity as *Killzone*'s muted hues.

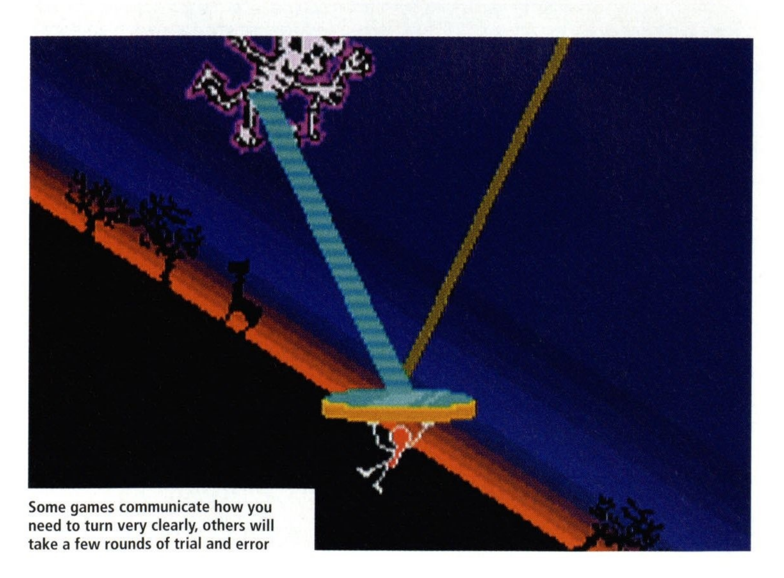
It's all about the hardware: *Mawaru*'s handsome, rugged twist detector is almost faultless. Sensitive and reliable, it gives a tiny tug of rumble as you turn your GBA, providing vital feedback and making the game come alive in your hands. Nintendo's earlier efforts – notably *Kirby's Tilt'n'Tumble* – feel shoddy by comparison.

It's all about the subtext: where the first *Made In Wario* raided 25 years of gaming consciousness, *Mawaru* has started to draw on its own bizarre heritage. Games familiar from the previous versions reappear, wonderfully warped for the twisted new world they now inhabit. More likely to be overlooked is what *Mawaru* shows about games' ability to 'do' story. Rather than copying literary or cinematic traditions, *Mawaru* tells its tiny stories in two-second spurts of observation, extrapolation and interaction.

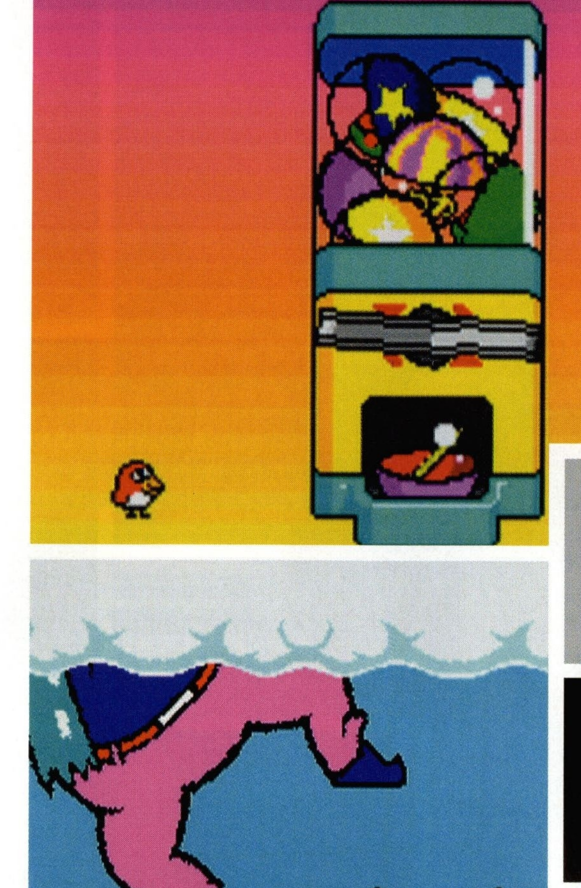
It's all about the extras: the wind-up toys and kaleidoscopes you unlock as you go. Finding a record by the Super Mario Bros you have to twist round and round to play may only be a momentary diversion, but that doesn't dilute the value of the brief, fierce thrill.

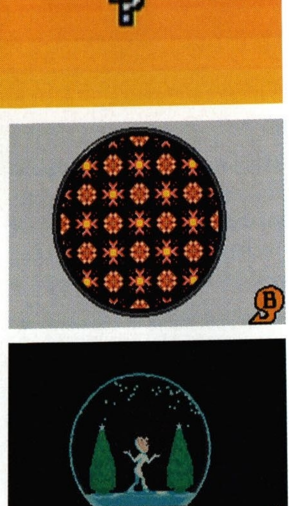
And yes, it's all about the games. From start to finish you'll never touch the D-pad. Twisting and turning, first carefully then wildly, *Mawaru*'s ludicrous tasks contort your limbs as much as your grin. Forget Havok, this is physics-based play where you're the rag-doll.

*Mawaru* faces two problems. It simply can't be as groundbreaking as the first *Made In Wario*, and there is consequently a sense of déjà-vu which was entirely lacking in the original. The physical input, while adding a frantic immediacy and accessibility, also makes more apparent the repetitive nature of many of the games. They may be skinned in extraordinary and unpredictable settings, but the identical jerks and swivels they all require make it harder to ignore how well the game works as a Pavlovian training device. It matters little. If this is the benchmark the next generation of handheld devices aim for, then we're in for a very fine few years. **[8]**

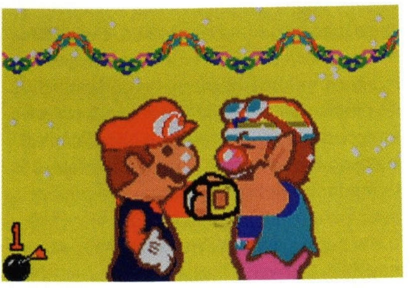


Some games communicate how you need to turn very clearly, others will take a few rounds of trial and error



Successfully complete each character's challenges and you're rewarded with a capsule toy. Some, like this snowglobe, will only amuse you for a second or two



Some games are worth playing badly just to see what happens when you lose. Mess up the timing on Mario and Wario's brotherly high five, and they fade to grey and crack apart. Maybe they can make up at the kart track






The kinstones drive the subquests in *The Minish Cap*; find and fuse matching pieces with another Hyrule resident and 'something good might happen'. It's a transparent device, but it works far better than the fussy and pointless ring system of the *Oracles* games



# THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE MINISH CAP

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: TBA RELEASE: OUT NOW (UK), Q1 2005 (AU)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM

There is no other videogame series quite as established as *Zelda*: be it in the loyalty the games inspire worldwide or in the very structure and substance of these sprawling, bewitching clockwork fairytales. Other franchises may have traditions, but *Zelda* is one: like the ancient oral sagas it draws on, it is the same tale endlessly retold, referencing only itself, embellishing and growing its teeming worlds with each telling, seldom straying far from the perfect, inviolate rulebook at its heart.

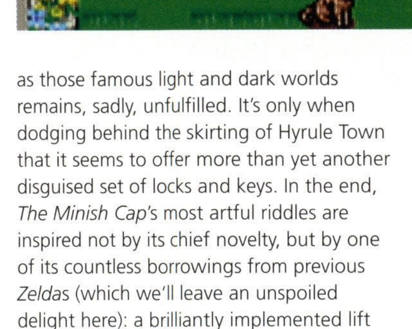
Nintendo's faith in that rulebook is such that it deputised Capcom to produce the *Oracles* diptych on the Game Boy Color, and now this new GBA adventure. After all, the *Zelda* formula is so refined and reliable that the games almost make themselves, especially in 2D. But there are diminishing returns implicit in that, and indeed the *Oracles*' slavish observance rang hollow. *The Minish Cap*, though far from the radical revisionism of the brilliant *Four Swords* or *Majora's Mask*, is a much more confident effort, with a style and soul of its own.

Much of that is drawn from the simply irresistible hook: on this quest to rescue the Princess (a secondary spur to the desire to uncover every mystery in the land), Link can shrink. With the help of his chatty enchanted hat, Ezlo, he can explore the secret worlds of the tiny Minish people, battling bugs and slugs, or crawl across human-scale Hyrule as an adorably animated dot.

Whilst this miniaturisation lends the game much of its storybook charm, the promise of a gaming Gulliver as intricate and befuddling as those famous light and dark worlds remains, sadly, unfulfilled. It's only when dodging behind the skirting of Hyrule Town that it seems to offer more than yet another disguised set of locks and keys. In the end, *The Minish Cap*'s most artful riddles are inspired not by its chief novelty, but by one of its countless borrowings from previous *Zelda*s (which we'll leave an unspoiled delight here): a brilliantly implemented lift from a most unlikely source.

It would be easy to take *The Minish Cap* for granted, left as it is with little to do but shuffle and tinker with its immaculate heritage. That, however, would be a grave mistake. Faith is rewarded when this initially modest game comes into its own late on, particularly in one dungeon of such airy, vertiginous genius that the word 'dungeon' seems quite inappropriate.

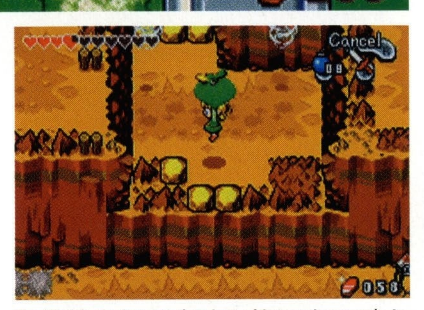
The luxurious quantity and quality of this game is almost unprecedented on a handheld system, from the innumerable bustling cartoons to the rich audio, from the meticulous design to the vast depth, breadth and length of the challenge. After tens of hours of play, the wellspring of love, craftsmanship and invention poured into *The Minish Cap* simply refuses to run dry. Maybe you can't go wrong with the *Zelda* template, but they haven't always gone this right. **[8]**







Link's inventory is the usual mix of new and old. The gust jar, a vacuum cleaner by any other name, is the best new item. Hilarious in battle, you really don't need to think for too long to see its inherent possibilities, and neither did *The Minish Cap*'s designers




The Minish cap is more than just a big nagging mouth. As well as allowing you to shrink it can also act as a hot air balloon. Catch an updraft and you can float to new areas



Heavily influenced by *The Wind Waker*, but with a slightly softer cartoon style, the sumptuous visuals are a timely overhaul of *Zelda*'s well-worn 2D iconography

## Small talk




**One of the chief pleasures of any *Zelda* game is its dialogue (or monologue, since Link has always been a very mute mouthpiece for the player). *Minish Cap*'s writing initially seems a touch gauche and simplistic, but a little time spent in Hyrule Town reveals some lovely, affectionate satire of human frailties: the idle, hobbyist mayor with his undeserved lakeside retreat, or the hysterically cheery woman who sits in the café drinking 'milk' without pause and doesn't want to think about what to make for dinner. Such worldly honesty and lack of condescension are nothing short of wonderful in a videogame that will be played by hundreds of thousands of children.**



# EVERQUEST II

FORMAT: PC PRICE: $89.95 (+30 DAY FREE TRIAL)
RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: SOE

## Norrath Wide Web

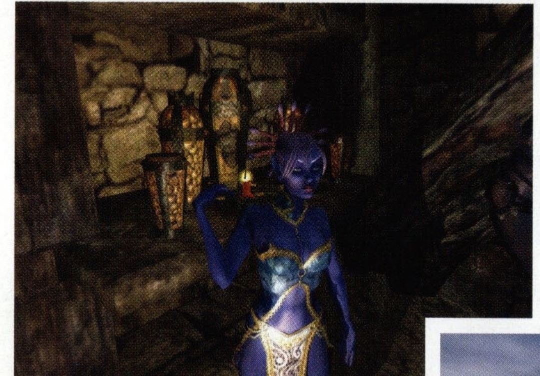


**Testament to Sony Online's dedication to make *Everquest II* a success, all player guilds get their own free webspace at eq2players.station.sony.com. From your web browser, you can see who's currently in the game and what items they're equipped with. You can also see how your guild is ranked, check out various statistics such as your 'kills vs death' ratio, and manage your own news, forum, image gallery and chat room. For high level characters, *Everquest II* is more about earning guild experience, gaining access to prestige rewards and content that is locked away from other players, so these web features are a handy asset to managing your band of adventurers.**



An epic war rages on computer servers all over the planet as you read this, but it's not only being waged by goblins, elves and orcs. Thousands of gamers are choosing their allegiance, and signing up to help sway the tide of battle in a face off between two massive multiplayer properties – *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest II*. For Sony Online Entertainment and *Everquest II*, you would think the path to victory would be an easy one. The first *Everquest* is now legendary, and it's natural to think that gamers would scramble to its sequel like ants to honey. However, *World of Warcraft* has proved a formidable foe, so this is no shoe-in for the denizens of Norrath.

Sony Online are well aware that a bit of visual pizzazz is an important drawcard in this day and age, and Everquest II's graphics are as astoundingly detailed as the environments are epic and atmospheric. Traversing the lush landscapes of Antonica is delightful, and exploring the dusty, crumbling tunnels of Stormhold is suitably eerie. With graphical detail settings that go higher than the current best videocards can handle, there's longevity in this engine too. But pretty pictures aside, Everquest II is still a very impressive piece of work. With a vast number of possible quests to be discovered, there is always something to keep the player occupied – not taking into account the inevitable socialising with other adventurers. There is literally never a dull moment as you poke around the alleyways or interact with the hundreds of fully voice-acted NPCs.

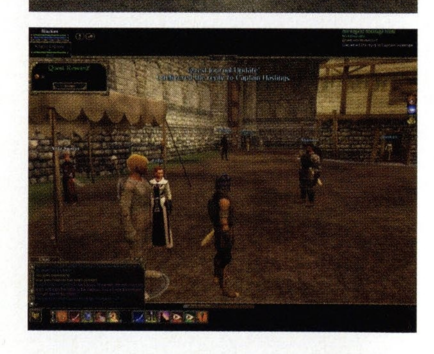


**Diminutice pieces of clothing aren't all Everquest II uses to hold its audiences attention with - voice acted NPC conversation adds a significant amount of character to the game, something the original game direly lacked.**

**An entourage of classes and races to choose from results in a true rogues gallery throughout Norrath, with very little of the MMORPG phenomena of clones running around everywhere.**

One aspect of MMORPGing that worries some players is the 'level grind', however *Everquest II* manages to distract you with so many fun little tasks and sub-quests, that that final block of experience points always feels well within your reach. If you're not searching for those hidden books of magic in the sewers, or hunting your final Darkpaw Shaman, you're seeking to complete difficult access quests to gain passage into new locations or working with your guild to earn special status points. There's always a carrot dangling somewhere for you to have a bite at, no matter how much you gnaw at it.

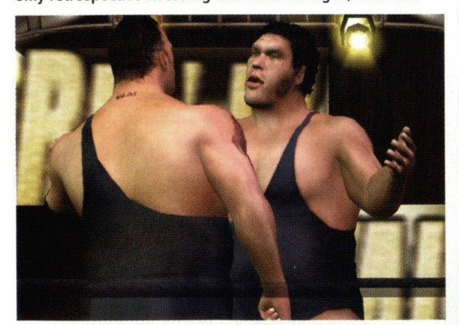
With an intuitive interface that keeps things simple (none of the spiderweb like menus found in *Star Wars: Galaxies*), everything in the game is as easy as a left or right mouse click. The quest log efficiently keeps track of up to 50 different missions, and preparing yourself for combat or crafting is as easy as arranging colourful icons on a toolbar. Whilst this is no revolution from the original *Everquest*, it's definitely a very convincing evolution. *Everquest II* is an accessible game – and importantly, it's great fun no matter what your skill level - so it would seem that mainstream gamers might just be lured into the melee and monthly charges this time around. *World of Warcraft* might make you say "wow", but *Everquest II* makes enough of its own improvements on the genre to make it a real line call. **[8]**



**Like all MMORPGs, only areas densely populated with actual players ever look like they're truly inhabited.**



With all WWE bouts involving a lot of fantasy material, the ability to take old favourites such as Andre the Giant and put them up against their modern-day counterpart is something only retrospective wrestling tiles have managed, until now.






# WWE SMACKDOWN! VS. RAW

FORMAT: **PS2** PRICE: **$99.95** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **YUKES MEDIA CREATIONS**

As far as branding goes, it's safe to say the *Smackdown!* series of games has become like a sports franchise, in that the annual updates that form the series generally offer little more than expanded rosters and visual touch-ups. In this regard, *Smackdown!*, as a franchise, is more akin to the likes of EA's *Madden NFL* or *NBA Live* series than wrestling games of old. To this end, there doesn't seem to be as much 'fun' injected into the games anymore and the seriousness of simulating sport takes over.

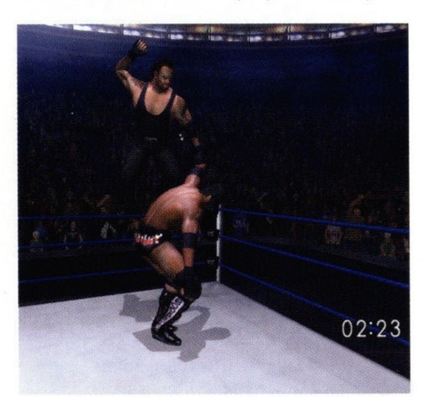
Breaking it down, 'fun' things like wild and varied storylines are sorely missing from the *Smackdown!* games. For wrestling fans they would be the ideal avenue of expansion, as would creative matches and 'spontaneous' acts of frivolity, elements the television series of WWE's Smackdown! and Raw revolve around. But *WWE Smackdown! Vs. Raw* is sadly like the aforementioned *Madden* or *NBA Live* - it's business as usual rather than a glut of new material and features.

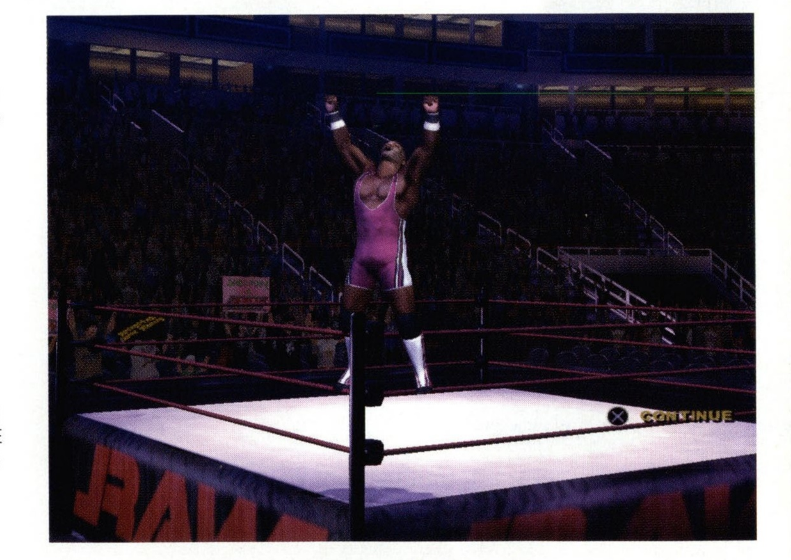


Watching uncomplicated nubile women grapple in underwear may entertain WWE's audiences in reality, but virtual voyeurism is where the audience sees acting and line delivery that's even more wooden than normal...

Those who have played the series-defining *WWE Smadown! Here Comes The Pain* already have a pretty good idea of what to expect here. Essentially, this very much like *HCTP*, with the aforementioned customary roster tweak, while the battle system has remained marginally untouched. There are of course a few updates fans will revel in, mini games that precede matches, like the stare-down where players input a button combination based on on-screen prompts (winning gives you the first blow of the match), is one such update. Online play has been added, though with all the depth of wafer, where options are limited to wrestling singles head-to-head, or wrestling with WWE Divas in bra and panties matches. They could have done so much more.

The overall presentation is nice, though the overuse of WWE Divas throughout the game's menus becomes tedious for those who only want to subscribe to the action, without the beefcake soap-opera. Aurally,

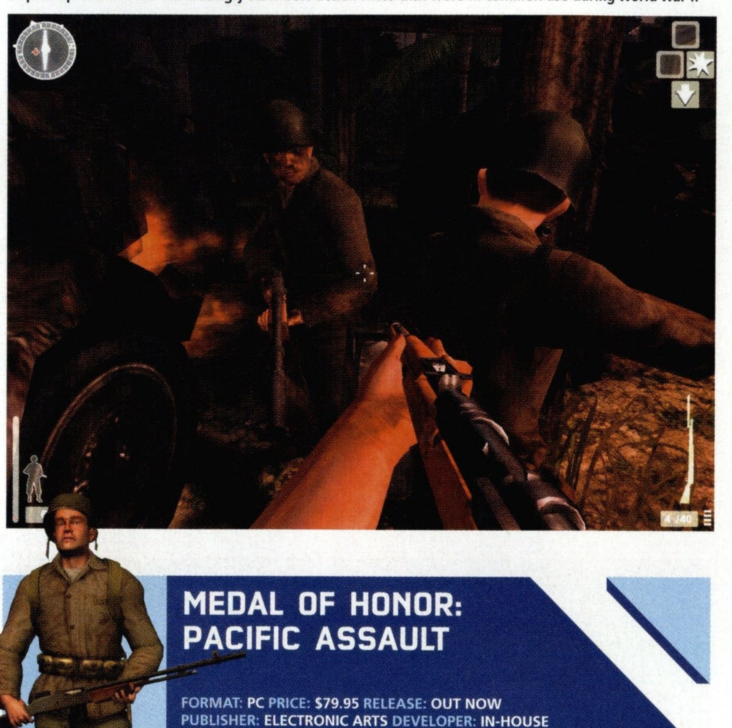



this is perhaps the best version of series with a number of Superstars recording lines for the game's rather linear story mode, nice to hear. Better yet, commentary has been revamped with both the Smackdown! and Raw commentators respectively, working in much more verbal character, though it's oft times misplaced or incorrect.

Unless you're obsessive about a contemporary roster, or the series in general, *Here Comes the Pain* could tide you over until the next wave of wrestling titles invade next-gen machines. *Smackdown! Vs. Raw* introduces too little to warrant a purchase for anyone who owns the last game, and for those still looking to purchase, exercise your right to try before you buy. **[4]**

Only two weapons can be carried at any one time, and for a large part of the game players will be forced to pick up and use the frustratingly slow bolt-action rifles that were in common use during World War II





Big gun emplacements feature heavily throughout the game. Their impact has been upped a few notches with a superb reverberation blur added to the standard recoil effects we're used to



# MEDAL OF HONOR: PACIFIC ASSAULT

FORMAT: PC PRICE: $79.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



*Pacific Assault* relies heavily on scripted events for its drama and impact. This often works admirably, but in other cases the action seems stilted and disjointed

When *Call Of Duty* arrived last year, World War II shooters had never been finer. They had found their crescendo in pitch-perfect battle-horror and brilliant setpieces, bringing all fronts of the war together in one high-intensity knapsack. *Pacific Assault* may leap for that same benchmark, but misses and comes crashing down in the boot camp mud. This latest *Medal Of Honor* game, younger cousin to last year's Activision release, lurches between extreme spectacle and the nerve-grinding tedium of quicksave attrition. For each moment that shines there are two that wobble, choke and then topple awkwardly into the trenches.

While the post-tutorial scenes at Pearl Harbour are an over-the-top Wagnerian ode to the glorious defeat of righteous heroes, the jungle sections are mired in themes that are shared by both the Pacific war theatre and badly-designed firstperson shooters: they're frustrating, repetitive and unfair. Yes, some levels are sheer Hollywood rollercoaster, but others are little more than follow-the-arrow shooting galleries. The fun has been completely drained from these sections, and the awful clipping and wanton inaccuracy of the weapons often means that key sections demand trial and error punctuated with endless battering of the quicksave key to ensure progress. Of course there *are* some nice touches to balance out these misadventures, particularly in the blurring effects of firing heavy weapons or when suffering from shellshock. And *Pacific Assault* also goes further than any previous game in conveying the sheer awfulness of being shot and then gutted by a screaming Japanese infantryman – an honestly surprising and shocking moment of violence that may lead you to expect great things. Dumb AI buddies and exasperating combat, though, will soon confound that expectation.

Both are demonstrated ably by the implementation of your squad medic, who can patch up fallen soldiers, including the player. You can call the medic over at the tap of a key, but once the process has started it cannot be interrupted. If you're being patched and an enemy charges you, bayonet at the ready, then you find you can't raise so much as a pistol to stop him. Add to these many deaths the excruciating length of the loading times and hair begins to part company with scalp.

*Pacific Assault* demonstrates that bewildering battle scenes are no equal to genuinely clever level design and attention to detail. It also illustrates the near-bottomless potential for World War II-based set-pieces but, crucially, it lacks the vision and sense of fluidity that the increasingly crowded PC shooter genre now demands. The bolt-action rifle games probably won't die any time soon, but this is another ugly blunder. **[5]**

## Patch me up



**The medic proves to be both the best and worst aspect of *MOH:PA*. Best because he'll throw up after taking a look at your wounds when you're badly injured, and worst because of the way his capacity to patch you up works, or fails to, in the heat of battle. Use up his bandages and patch-up kit and you'll find yourself restarting a section, unable to defeat the enemies without it. Even more frustrating is the way the medic can still patch up your AI pals, making them practically invulnerable. It's an inconsistency that shatters any disbelief you might have otherwise suspended.**






As well as summoning friends to fight with you, you can call upon bosses you've conquered to help you out. Doing so costs Adder Stones, which can only be found in dungeon chests






Boss battles test your tactical skills. At times it's best to summon a support team of healers and stunners while you hack your way to victory. Sometimes it's best to hang back and let your bruisers do the job, summoning replacements whenever they bite the dust

# THE BARD'S TALE

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: US$50 ($63)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), FEBRUARY (AU) PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: INXILE PREVIOUSLY IN: E3

The tale told here is a good, old-fashioned yarn – of cocky heroes, stranded princesses, evil monks and avaricious trolls. However, the far more interesting story is the one of how InXile hatched a plot to take on one of the most fiendish monsters in all of videogaming: the RPG. The plan was simple – take the robust and malleable *Dark Alliance* engine and set a dozen men to work, smashing through old conventions and crafting interesting new dynamics. And it's clear from the game that they whistled while they worked; *The Bard's Tale* is steeped in infectious enthusiasm and clear-sighted affection for the genre. Sadly, it wasn't enough, and this isn't a story that has a fairy-tale ending.

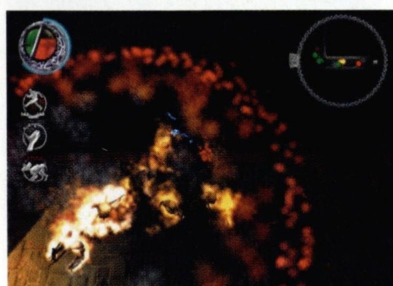
Things start very well, or rather very beautifully. The strength – and enormous frustration – of the *Dark Alliance* engine is always that it gives the false impression that the world would be every bit as detailed and beautiful up close as from your remote, top-down perspective. Into this sun-dappled paradise strolls the Bard – foul-mouthed, unprincipled, on the prowl for both kinds of booty. He sets the tone for the rest of a game which uses dry wit, broad innuendo and unexpected bouts of karaoke to lampoon RPG conventions – a pretty easy target, it must be admitted. He is soon drawn in to a tale which will take him from forest to dungeon and from weapon shop to magical tower. Suddenly things don't look so genre-busting.

InXile, of course, never set out to destroy the RPG, only re-forge it, and many of the mechanics the Bard brings with him are genuinely fresh. Himself dependent on physical attacks, he can summon a retinue of magical helpers (see Band of barders) who fight on his side until their health is exhausted. Juggling their inter-connected skills is a very different challenge from pummelling fire dragons with ice spells, and adds a real sense of scale and camaraderie to the game's battles. Their simple AI is magnificently well implemented, and they path-find and deploy themselves with predictable, reliable results.

As his story progresses, however, this initial promise becomes increasingly hamstrung. The knowing jokes about the pointlessness of RPG A-to-B-to-A quests wear bitingly thin by the time you embark on your third trek back and forth. The massed brawls, though dramatic, can become clumsy and repetitive. The Bard's best bet is all too often hanging back and firing off the screen towards the docile red dots which show on his map. There's ultimately little variation in the gameplay – and you can find yourself yearning for the change of pace that all that old-school inventory management you thought you hated could bring to this kind of game. There's also very little freedom – galling in a game which credits its players with so much intelligence.

Ultimately, setting out to critique and parody so studiously such a hidebound genre has brought *The Bard's Tale* too close to what it was trying to distance itself from. This is a conventional, likeable dungeon crawl whose flashes of brilliance distract you from its accomplishments by hinting at how much more it could have been. **[7]**





The environments differ dramatically throughout the game, from sunny glades to tortuous dungeons where blood flows from gruesome channels into deep pools where zombies have to wade their way towards you

You have no direct control over what the Bard says to the people he meets. All you can do is steer him in the right direction. Beware – trying to be nice can get you into real trouble as the Bard chooses to blab the unpalatable truth

## Band of barders



**The Bard must play a song to summon each of his helpers – resulting in many Benny Hill moments as he flees from a string of goblins while whipping out his lute. Picking the best combination is a subtle challenge and varies from fight to fight. The Bodyguard will block enemies as they attack, allowing the Heroine to fall back and attack with bows. Add a stunning Thunder Spider into the mix, a Crone to heal you all and an Enchantress to resurrect anyone who dies and battle becomes a complex ballet. Each has a secondary attack and all can be upgraded by finding (or stealing) new tunes.**

Houses play a crucial tactical role, turning transparent as soldiers move inside them and take up position at the windows. Tank shells destroy them utterly, however, crushing whoever is inside. Trenches might be safer









# PATHWAY TO GLORY

FORMAT: N-GAGE PRICE: TBA RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NOKIA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (RED LYNX)







Even in multiplayer the interface stays clear. Soldiers have two active weapons, but carry alternatives. Leave a heavy weapons specialist with action points to spend and he may waste bazooka shells on infantry. Swap him to his rifle and he can defend himself until it's time to take out the tanks










This is a game with real visual flair, from the superb maps to the painted intros and extraordinary photo credits

## Noisy chatter




***Pathway To Glory*'s N-Gage Arena wasn't open to the public at the time of this review, but test games with players in Finland, Canada and England worked flawlessly. Each player receives a steady (if slow) stream of reinforcements, which can extend the otherwise fast paced games into epics. This isn't problematic. Games remain open as long as anyone is playing, so if the original host goes through a tunnel or into a lecture, everyone else can continue playing. One of the neatest touches in multiplayer is the field radio – record a brief message for a team-mate and they'll receive it, complete with authentic hiss and crackle, at the start of their next turn.**

In the history of hardware, no console has needed the perfect synergy that firstparty software brings as badly as the N-Gage needs *Pathway To Glory*. This is Nokia's first firstparty title, in development for nearly two years, given access to every secret of the N-Gage and funded to a degree external developers must long for. It shows.

What at first sight is a muddy WWII RTS inspired by dozens of PC titles that clutter the budget shelves, reveals itself to be everything a firstparty title ought to be – an ideal gaming expression of the hardware's capabilities. It's inspired by those PC titles, without doubt, but it takes those rules and adapts them with the elegance a handheld title needs. Your squad of up to eight soldiers moves organically on the map, each step eating into their available action points. At any stage they can fire, spending extra points to up their accuracy. Any points left at the end of a turn aren't wasted. Instead, the soldiers will fire upon any enemy who crosses their line of sight. It's this choice – spend points on an aggressive advance or save them for a hostile defence – which creates the core of *Pathway*'s strategic challenge.




Multiplayer campaigns ebb and flow over a string of maps. Damage is permanent, so if you are driven back to maps you've already won you'll be faced with less cover

There would have been plentiful excuses to leave it at that – who would expect much more from a handheld? However, it doesn't stop. Soldiers carry up to four items – weapons, medikits, airstrike radios. Their stance affects their movement, their aim, their range and their defence. Each is a well-rounded individual, with a name, nationality, rank and skills. Keep them alive through the battle and they may earn a promotion and improve those skills. Lose them and they're replaced with raw recruits.

So surely, with that much depth crammed onto a small screen, the result must be dry and stat-bound? Not at all. Having a handset with so many buttons allows the controls to be streamlined, and the interface is a masterpiece of functional minimalism. *Pathway* is also surprisingly gutsy. Bullets slice the screen with a fierce, metallic whine, shells thump and rumble, tanks explode and houses collapse. The soldiers, despite their tiny size, are fully mo-capped, and each is voiced with an array of regional soundbites that are functional enough to bear being played over and over again.

But the N-Gage is still a phone, and because it's a phone, *Pathway* blossoms into something fundamentally new. Bluetooth allows local co-op and competitive matches, but the N-Gage arena enables global match-ups (see Noisy chatter) facilitated by text and voice messaging. This is world war like never before – people in parks, pubs and stations joining forces across continents. That said, it isn't inherently radical – this is an old play style re-thought and refined to perfectly exploit the N-Gage's particular strengths. There are also some gripes – movement can't be cancelled when you order it by mistake, and games can't be saved mid-mission (although they can be suspended, without any impact on your phone's functionality, for as long as your battery lasts). These aside, *Pathway* is genuinely excellent. **[8]**






## KURURIN SQUASH

FORMAT: GC PRICE: ¥3,800 ($48)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (AU)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: EIGHTING

With the ever-rising sophistication of handhelds, the console puzzle game seems doomed to die a slow, groaning death. It was a bit of a shock, then, when Eighting announced the third volume in its *Kururin* series was coming to the GameCube.

The premise of the series, for the uninitiated, is simple: Kururin, the curlicue-cowlicked aviary aviator, pilots his perpetually-spinning long-armed ship Heririn through a number of treacherous, twisting labyrinths toward a goal point. Three strikes of the ship's arms against the maze walls, or any another floating hazard, and the Heririn explodes. It's a gamer's game – all reaction time, all learning to stick and move, all about wending your way through a nest of pitfalls in a graceful arc, shaving seconds off your time.

*Squash* is essentially more of the same – and after two terrific prequels, that's not at all a bad thing – but Eighting has also included upgrades and modifications for the series' first console outing. In the new Action Stages, Kururin's ship is outfitted with one of a handful of weapons which, in conjunction with continuously respawning swarms of enemies, add a layer of freneticism and aggressiveness to the white-knuckled manoeuvring the game normally requires. Tucked away in the hairpin curves of the stages you'll also discover coins to spend on cosmetic upgrades.

*Squash*'s downfall is not in anything qualitative about the gameplay itself, which remains as tight and refined as ever, it's that there just isn't enough of it. Perhaps it's simply the responsiveness that the analogue stick brings, but the dedicated will breeze through *Squash* in little time at all. Challenge mode offers dozens more levels in a race to beat a time, but all are unlocked from the start, which leaves no reward beyond the high score table. *Kururin Paradise* had 16 single- and multiplayer minigames – *Squash* brings all of two. A simplistic GBA-linked minigame, purchasable super-play videos and an after-game surprise are all very welcome additions, but no more than novelty.

*Squash* easily could have been the all-singing, all-dancing triumph of the series, bringing the voluminous gameplay of the former iterations and wrapping it in a polygonal pastel candy-coat, but ends up little more than a value-priced tasty snack that'll leave you wanting more. **[6]**



Among the new modifications is a submarine that lets Kururin dip below the surface or rise above underwater cacti, creating dual-layer puzzles




*Kururin Squash* also has, for the first time, boss fights for each world, each utilising a different weapon from amongst Kururin's arsenal. Here, Kururin uses his boxing gloves to knock the strawberries from the boss' shortcake, while simultaneously avoiding the chocolate bars and assorted cookies being flung his way

## LORD OF THE RINGS: THE THIRD AGE

FORMAT: GC, GBA, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: $99.95 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

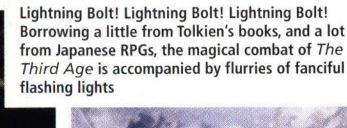


Excellent attention to character detail almost has you believing (almost) you're in the world of the films. At least, until somebody opens their mouth...

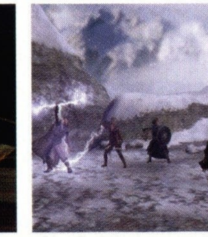
Apocrypha has an irresistible lure for fans of any hallowed text, offering more of the same without the stigma of fan-fiction. Here we have an extension of an adaptation, where a squad of generic Middle-Earth hero archetypes trundle through the larger world of Peter Jackson's movies. Their mission is obtusely linked to that of the fellowship, but involves a lot more chests and wandering monsters.

Compounding references further, the combat system has been appropriated from the *Final Fantasy* games, which in turn pilfered from Tolkien via Dungeons & Dragons. *The Third Age* enriches this concept with more tactical versatility in party formations, and dress-up equipping options that reflect some of the intense design effort that went into the films. Alas, these evocative trappings merely serve to clothe hyper-realistic, soulless mannequin creatures, rather than the more expressive, cartoon-like heroes we've come to expect from Square. Textures look flat, and that generic, low-poly count feel of cross-platform compliance is a perfect match for the clusters of 2D foliage. Tolkien himself rendered more convincing flora better with the English language alone.

Cinematic flourishes abound, and there is a clear affinity for both the subject matter and its implementation. Equally stark is that the creative talent behind *The Third Age* had little room to move. Perhaps an exploration of the first fall of Sauron or an interactive romp through the Silmarilion - *KOTOR* style, instead of such a transparently marketed and packaged product would have done more to capture the public's imagination. Gamers will buy it for the film, and play through it for the limited melodrama, but turn-based tactical RPGs have a lot more to offer than Balrogs and bathos. **[6]**



Lightning Bolt! Lightning Bolt! Lightning Bolt! Borrowing a little from Tolkien's books, and a lot from Japanese RPGs, the magical combat of *The Third Age* is accompanied by flurries of fanciful flashing lights




ETERNAL DARKNESS







# TIME EXTEND

## ETERNAL DARKNESS: SANITY'S REQUIEM

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SILICON KNIGHTS**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE DATE: **2002**

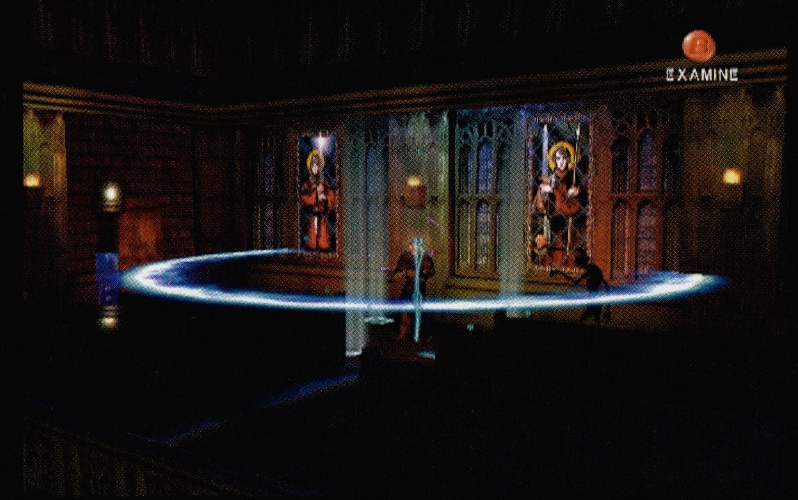


**Silicon Knights' Eternal Darkness was supposed to revolutionise survival horror. It didn't, of course. Hindsight shows it did much, much more**

'Flensed' is the word which best describes *Eternal Darkness*. Not because of what it means – although we'll get to that – but because the decision to use it in the game's dialogue sent players scurrying for their dictionaries as surely as the scares had sent them diving behind their sofas. Games in general – particularly console games and especially particularly Nintendo games – aren't supposed to be erudite. *Eternal Darkness*, however, wears its scholarship on its sleeve, from the opening quote from Edgar Allen Poe to the references to Sir James George Frazer's The Golden Bough.

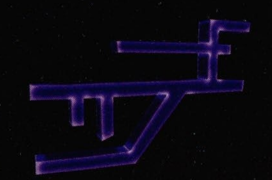
Once players had tracked down 'flensed' in their dictionaries, they found that it was a word whose meaning matched the game perfectly. The fate of the woman who uses it seems much more macabre when you discover that she's had her flesh stripped from her bones like the blubber from a whale. It sums up *Eternal Darkness*' horror very well, full of understated violence and squeamish shlock. But there's another aspect of the word which makes it a good way to sum up the game: it doesn't quite work. Leaving aside the incongruity – why is a sixth century Persian princess using Danish whale-hunting slang? – its obscurity snags the player's attention at a moment when they should be lost in the doomed, bitter romance of Karim and Chandra. 'She was *whatted* by knives?' you say. 'Cleansed? Phlegmed?' At least you did if you'd turned the subtitles off. It's a tiny point, but one which runs right through the game. Silicon Knights had too many ideas for *Eternal Darkness* – some over-elaborate, some clunkily simplistic

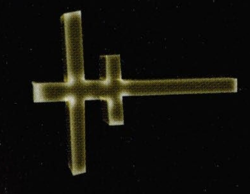
**The fate of the woman seems more macabre when you discover she's had her flesh stripped from her bones like the blubber from a whale**




*Eternal Darkness*' magic system was pure theatre, forcing you to stand still while each rune was laboriously etched into the earth. The camera angles – fixed but flexible – added to the sense of deliberate, dramatic staging


The Trapper dimension is an ingenious novelty. Both curse and haven, it offers the player a chance to refill their gauges at the risk of extra attacks. The player can also turn trapper, banishing enemies rather than fighting





– and in the process they both created and hobbled a masterpiece.

The tale is certainly elaborate, and too much to be retold here, but its structure is flawless. Two millennia of desperate human struggle against the Darkness are revealed in brief, brutal flashes, dashing you from modern Indonesia to medieval Persia and back again. At first it's frustrating as you body-hop from one bafflingly unrelated character to the other, but soon connecting strands start to reveal themselves, mostly though the familiar architecture of the places you explore. By sending different characters back to the same place at different points in time, Silicon Knights produced a narrative which should form a key chapter in The Big Book Of How Games Ought To Tell Stories. Rather than relying on dialogue or cut-scenes (although the game has plenty of both), it uses your familiarity with the varied locations to provide the context and the tone of each chapter of the story. Discovering the vast cathedral that has grown to absorb Amiens' humble chapel is affecting only because you're painstakingly familiar with the latter. Wandering around the Roivas mansion becomes systematically more fraught as you experience each moment of its bloody history. It's also a kind of story-telling which ties directly onto the gameplay. Knowledge of the environment, and of secrets and items, gained from previous visits allows the puzzles to be more oblique than they would in lesser games.

The characters themselves are also unprecedentedly varied. Most game heroes are pulled together from the most basic of identikits – broad shoulders, big tits, tight pants, bigger guns. *Eternal Darkness* puts you into shoes filled by men who are fat and black and old. You might become frustrated at being forced to waddle around as a middle-aged architect or at a young reporter's suicidal decision to join in World War One armed only with a camera flash, but these limitations mean you never lose the sense of these characters' individuality. These are people with histories and personalities, whose adventures change them, leaving them sometimes wiser, sometimes deader.

**The characters you play rot before your eyes, sacrifice themselves to living deaths and descend into spittle-soaked madness**

**When games put** you in control of a character with its own identity, rather than an empty shell that you've created yourself, there's always a tension. 'How can Link be Link if I'm controlling him? How can I be Link if he sometimes does stuff without me telling him to? And why am I calling him 'he' if he's supposed to be me?' *Eternal Darkness* stretches this tension even more. Each chapter takes each character through an identical arc. In the course of going about their lives, each person is drawn to the Darkness. Horrified, they discover that they understood nothing of the real nature of the world. They start out innocent and end up corrupted. It means that, despite the skills and information the player learns throughout the game, each chapter resets the character you play to newbie status. It's here that the game's central conceit, the Tome Of Eternal Darkness, comes into its own. Part elaborate menu system, part get-out-of-jail-free card, the moment each character finds this book is the moment when the player's experience and the character's abilities become fused together. Suddenly, they know everything you know, and the gap is closed between you and your on-screen persona. The Tome Of Eternal Darkness doesn't contain the secrets of a supernatural conspiracy; it contains the secrets of how to design game characters which can withstand the contradiction of being distinct individuals and empty avatars for players to inhabit.

What demonstrates this most keenly is the game's 'real' hero, Alexandra Roivas. This is who you're really supposed to 'be' in the game. The other chapters are experienced as visions she endures while reading the Tome. As a consequence, she follows the rules of videogame hero design. Miserably bland in comparison to

It's a testament to the game's story telling abilities that the prospect of an ancient evil citadel carved out of your basement seems entirely plausible





## SCISSORS, PAPER, BLOOD

*Eternal Darkness*' devilish theology was also devilishly simple. Each god had a colour, a strength and a weakness. Red beats green, green beats blue, blue beats red. Cleverly, the god you choose in the first chapter becomes your nemesis, not your leader, and those three colours tie the plot and gameplay together, since green also governs sanity, red health and blue magic. Diligent players would also come to control the purple magic of the corpse god Mantorok, with sometimes unpredictable results.



Spells grow in intensity depending on the number of runes cast. The familiar voices which rasp them out become crucial in gauging which you have time for

the other characters, it's her clothes that send out the clearest signal. Throughout the game, from the moment she's woken in bed at 3.33 in the morning to the moment, weeks later, when she finally faces the game's ultimate evil, she's dressed in the same nice, safe, hero garb – black vest, black jeans. The fact that she doesn't change is supposed to reassure the player – look, here's the person you're *really* in control of. She's not going to sneak off and do anything without you like, say, have a shower or change her pants. The intention was almost certainly to balance the unsettling character-hopping of the rest of the game, but instead it undermines it. The convincing richness of the monk Luther, madman Maximilian and firefighter Michael demonstrate dramatically that the secret to making a game character easy to identify with isn't simply a case of emptying them out to make room for the player.

These characters, however, aren't the most striking things about the era-skipping structure of the story. What's truly remarkable is how each of them ends. No matter how well you fight or how smartly you puzzle, most of them end in failure. The characters you play rot before your eyes, sacrifice themselves to living deaths, descend into spittle-soaked madness or are simply crushed by the colossal powers they are trying to fight. It flies in the face of one of the most unquestioned assumptions in game design – that players like to win. In *Eternal Darkness* each chapter satisfies even when you can't escape your fate; indeed, each lost character strengthens your motivation to defeat the evil that destroyed them. Players don't like to win, they like the time they spend in the game to take them somewhere, to change the world around them. *Eternal Darkness* shows how much stronger a game's story can be when the player character doesn't have to be a Pollyanna or a John McClane.

These considerations, however, are all the backdrop to *Eternal Darkness*' most famous feature – its insanity effects. As each character is dragged further from their normal lives into the Darkness their sanity erodes, and your screen plays host to a series of tricks and shocks to which no-one was entirely immune. It was here, however, that Silicon Knights' lack of moderation shows itself most clearly. The insanity effects were endlessly inventive, but far too varied in tone and quality. The cleverest were the



ones which reached out into the real world: the 'controller unplugged' error message as zombies swarmed all over you; the 'deleting files' progress bar that popped up when you were trying to save. The simplest were the most effective – notably the awful, desperate banging on the doors as you approached. The cheapest were the ones which undermined this skilfully crafted atmosphere of paranoia and apprehension: the statue that turned to look at you like something out of The Muppets; the slapstick plop of your limbs as they fell off as you walked into a room. Every single effect, whether skilled or clumsy, was spoiled by the Hammer Horror hysteria with which each character would howl (or whimper, or groan) 'This… caaaan't… be… HA-PEN-NING!' after each effect had reset. Had the team had half as many ideas, but twice as much faith in them, *Eternal Darkness* could have been a truly scarring experience.

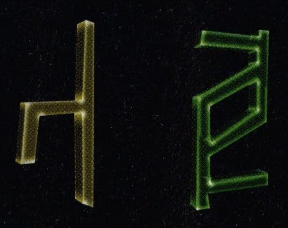
**But these successes** and failures are all secondary to the moment in the game which actually borders on the profound. The final visit to the great cathedral at Amiens takes place in 1916, and is seen through the eyes of a young war reporter. From its humble chapel beginnings more than a thousand years ago, you are now met with a vision of hell. Rocked by explosions and permeated with gloom, the cathedral is now a field hospital. The air is sharp with the moans of dying soldiers, the taint of mustard gas almost perceptible. The game, by this stage, has taught you not to believe your eyes. You've been schooled to dismiss visions as cruel and bizarre as this – ranks of young men, broken and burst by bullets and bayonets, barracked in a church. If you didn't know any better, this moment would seem as absurd as any cheap-thrill insanity effect the game had tried so far. Yet not only is it real in the context of the game, it's real for anyone watching. Forget the clever trick of the pretend volume bar appearing on screen, this is the game reaching out and grabbing a piece of human history. It's a moment whose meaning is as grim as it is irrefutable: forget Chattur'gha, Xel'lotath and Ulyaoth. There's no need to weave a fantastical tale about humanity coming close to destruction, about it being eaten alive from within by giant jellyfish. You need to look no further than the man in the next bed

**The game's puzzles veer from the simple to the exhausting.** Collecting parchments and letters is a common task, and one which often takes you from one end of the level to the other. Skills learned in each chapter are used by Alex to unlock the next

As each character completes their appointed role, they become immortalised in the strange room which houses the Tome. It's a grim, sobering sight







to see how close humanity is to evil, how close it came to destroying itself.

And while you can't get much bigger than that, *Eternal Darkness* also excels at the small. This is a game that loves the details. A key feature of the combat is the finishing move – the moment when you plunge your weapon over and over into the mass of zombie flesh you've felled in combat. Somehow, this gruesome ceremony helps you recover some of your sanity, and each character does it with individual flair. From a callous shotgun blast to the head to a fat, clumsy boot to the belly, each character has a flourish that sums them up perfectly. Then there's the continuity. As you revisit each area, you'll find traces of your earlier adventures there. Prising a familiar sword out of the desiccated hand of a character you played as, and died as, centuries before is immensely satisfying. Recognising the corpse you unthinkingly transported to the mysterious Trapper dimension when you yourself are teleported there substantially bolsters the sense that this is a single, coherent universe where the things you do last and have consequences.



The game's colour coding extends to the enemies you fight. Physically different, the zombies use magic, trigger insanity or regrow their limbs according to the god they serve. It acts as a secret – if very subtle – difficulty select

**There's no need to weave a fantastical tale about humanity coming close to destruction, about it being eaten alive by giant jellyfish**

The Trapper dimension is a perfect example of the game's unique approach to magic. Spells had a simple grammar – combine a verb (protect, absorb, etc) and a noun (self, area, item, etc), and you were free to invent a core vocabulary of vital magicks. These had to be cast live, each rune fizzing and sparking on the ground around you, and any attack would disrupt the spell and leave you defenceless. Many players found it unforgivably annoying, since it turned battles into a tedious game of bowls, rushing from one end of the arena to the other to gain enough time to complete a casting. There's no question, however, that it imposed a rhythm and a drama onto the game, particularly in the later stages where you and your opponent would face off against each other, holding your nerve while the air shimmered and voices hissed and scraped: "PARGON PARGON BANKOROK CHATTUR'GHA PARGON SANTAK PARGON".

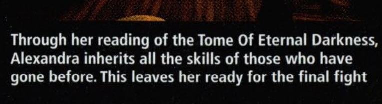
If ever a game needed good magic, this was it, the clunky combat (not perhaps inappropriate for a set-up which had amateurs fighting zombies) disappointed many. It forced a lumpy, methodical pace onto many sections of the game that ill-suited its story and atmosphere. It had its satisfactions, however. The targeting system allowed you to slice through a zombie's skull with a pathologist's precision, and offered the entertaining prospect of relieving an enemy of head and arms, and leaving him to blunder harmlessly around.

Nor was combat the only disappointment. Most of the puzzles contained in the Roivas mansion were old-fashioned, either insulting or confounding the player's intelligence. Finding buckshee pump-handles and letters hidden in spice jars seemed downright childish when compared to the sophisticated elements of the game. Other crude mechanics just seemed entirely pointless – requiring you to press the architect's 'survey' button at key points in the level felt like a hangover from a 16bit past. And for all the atmospherics, the game's N64 heritage is even clearer today than when it was released. Although many of the environments still convey a real sense of solidity and history, the textures, and particularly the wooden animation, serve as a reminder of how things used to be.

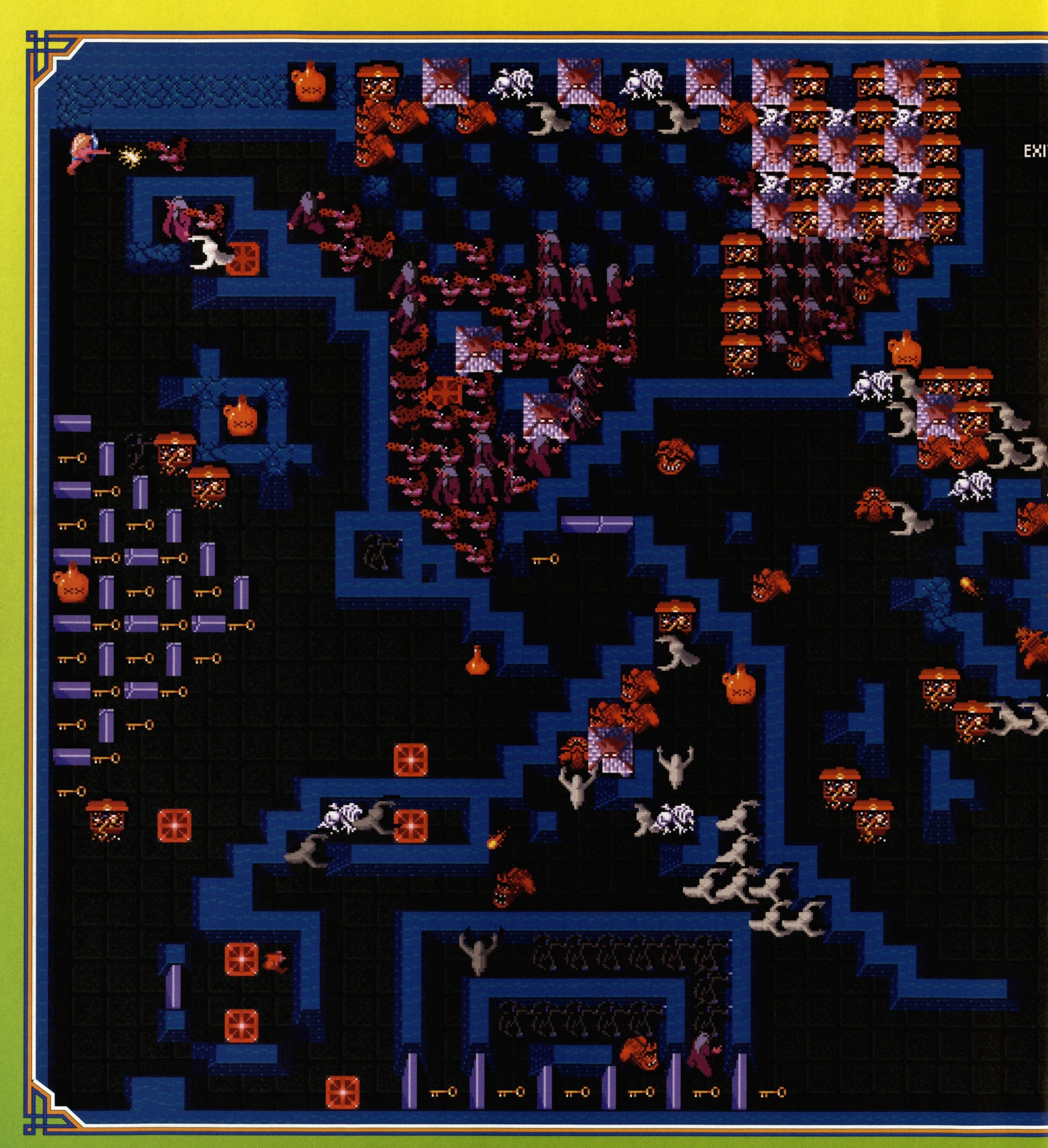
A masterpiece, then? Who cares. There are games that come much closer to perfection, without doubt. And certainly, those which have proved more influential. And many, of course, which have sold more copies. But few have as much to teach us as *Eternal Darkness*. As games become increasingly preoccupied with character and story, it's shocking that the benchmark for games' ability to emotionally affect players is still assumed to be the death of Aeris. That *Eternal Darkness* isn't first on people's lips when they open that can of worms is perhaps the greatest insanity effect of all.



The cathedral at Amiens, alongside the Roivas mansion, acts as the game's main focus. Its evolution is as historically accurate as it is visually impressive



Through her reading of the Tome Of Eternal Darkness, Alexandra inherits all the skills of those who have gone before. This leaves her ready for the final fight


EXIT



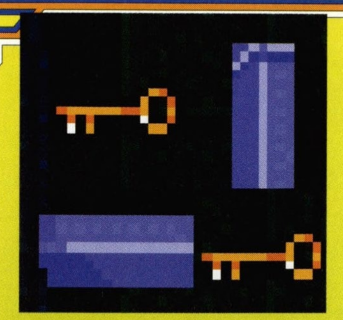
# THE MAKING OF... GAUNTLET

Before Lara had even developed habits of a raiding nature, Atari created an exploration game that revolutionised the action adventure. This month, we unearth a genuine gaming treasure

ORIGINAL FORMAT: COIN-OP PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE ORIGIN: US ORIGINAL RELEASE: 1985

By the mid-'80s, **Ed Logg**, creator of *Asteroids* and *Centipede*, had already established himself as a game developing legend in an industry that was just a little over a decade old. While his first two hits were probably his biggest financial successes and most well known, Logg's 1985 introduction of *Gauntlet* pioneered a series of lasting gaming and design elements still reflected in today's games. For developers, *Gauntlet* ushered in a series of core building blocks like multiplayer co-operative/competitive-style gaming, class-based characters, a nonlinear playing field and a pay-per-play system where coins bought a player health.

Just a few years past the 1980 introduction of *Asteroids*, the coin-operated market was no longer dominant. Coin-op developers were facing new competition from the attention-grabbing home console market. Even within Atari, there was an internal struggle which caused the company to split in two directions: Atari Games Corp became the






Thyra the valkyrie was a popular choice thanks to her speed, but in real terms Questor the elf was the most durable character, with magic powers rivalling the wizard's – an essential factor later in the game



The exact nature of the design involved in most levels couldn't be appreciated when you could see only a portion at a time…

coin-op division, and Atari Corp took the rest of the business – home console and computer games.

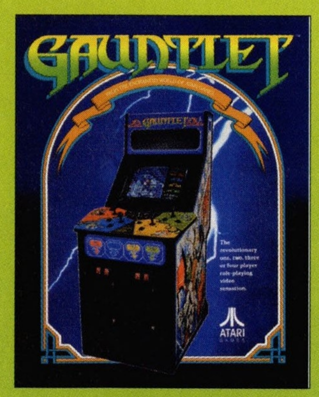
To stay in play, coin-op developers needed to outdo the home console games. "No longer could we get by with just a simple game. You could find these on all the home consoles and we wanted and needed to do something that would make the players come to the arcades. Games became more complex," says Logg. In addition, coin-op developers became slaves to feature creep: "When one game adds, say, a high score feature, all games thereafter have to do the same thing."

**It's no surprise** that *Gauntlet*, originally titled *Dungeons*, was inspired by Dungeons & Dragons. "My son was big into Dungeons & Dragons at the time and he was begging me to make a Dungeons & Dragons game. I had no idea how to do this until a co-worker, Robin Zeigler, brought in a new Atari game, called *Dandy*. Not only was it fun and innovative, but it gave me that spark to create a game with all the Dungeons & Dragons features I wanted into a multiplayer game." Jack Palevich, *Dandy*'s creator, tried fruitlessly to get his name included in the credits for *Gauntlet*. In lieu of public recognition, Atari Games Corp gave Palevich a *Gauntlet* cabinet.

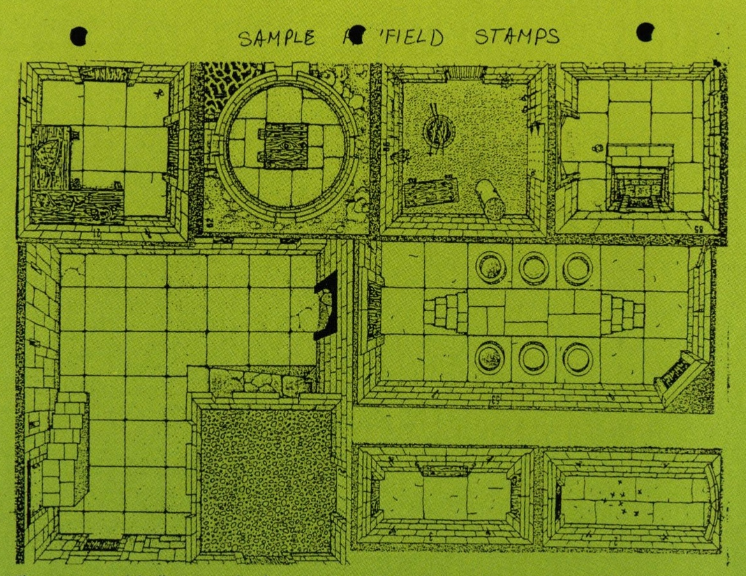
Logg's original game development documents describe *Gauntlet* as a classic Dungeons & Dragons adventure: "Players must navigate the maze, kill the nasties, eat food, collect treasures, open doors and find their way deeper into the dungeon until they reach the Hall Of Death. This is the final resting place of lost goodies. They will grab as much treasure as they want and try to escape back to daylight thus ending the game." When finally released, *Gauntlet* had no end, no Hall of Death and no escape to daylight.

With its revolutionary non-linear design, *Gauntlet* gave players multiple choices. They were no longer forced into playing the game over a predetermined route. Like Dungeons & Dragons, *Gauntlet* players could choose their own path, searching for keys, treasures, food and transporters to get to other levels. Unlike many games, you didn't always have to fight off the bad guys – sometimes you could find another route and escape.

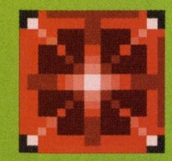
**With the switchover** from the 6502 to the more capable 68000 microprocessor, the development environment at Atari had changed considerably. "We were actually entering our own code at this point. Our development tools changed, too. We were now programming in C instead of assembly language," says Logg. "We no longer entered



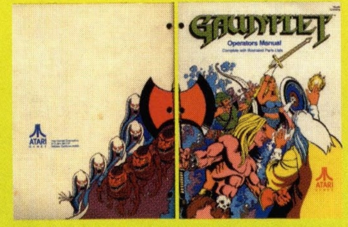

The original cabinet's scale had something to do with *Gauntlet*'s success: with enough room for four people to take part comfortably, it took multiplayer gaming to new levels in the arcade




The game was originally supposed to feature stone stairways between levels and an awful lot of extra detail included for atmospheric purposes. The contrast between this and the final game is quite stark






A fairly thick volume, the *Gauntlet* Operators Manual is essential reading for the collector

our programs into the development environment by paper tape." And the list goes on. All the advances had made development considerably easier, and the processor could handle many more instructions, but the games were definitely more complex.

*Gauntlet's* unique solutions for gameplay garnered Atari Games Corp five patents. One of the patents dealt with a streamlined method to determine collisions for the numerous objects on the screen – a common hurdle for early game developers. "Normal collision code tests 1,000 objects with the other 1,000 objects resulting in 1,000,000 collision checks," says Logg. Programmers could reduce this number but that often introduced a processing overhead. Logg's new method reduced both the overhead and collision tests to the lowest number possible. Commonly, nine collision tests were required for every object. Depending on the object's direction and its position, Logg could drop that collision testing to just three.



Thanks to superior hide, Thor the warrior was able to wade into danger and hand-to-hand it with enemies. Facing up to multiple Deaths, however, was enough to panic even the sternest gamer

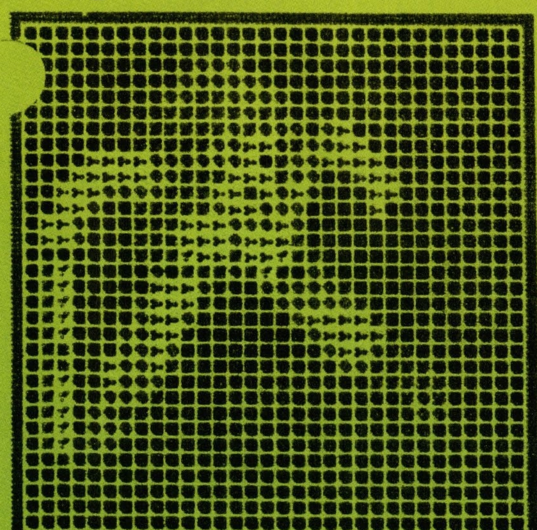
## "MANY OPERATORS THOUGHT IT WAS UNSAFE, DESPITE OUR DEMONSTRATIONS DROPPING STEEL BALLS ONTO MONITORS"

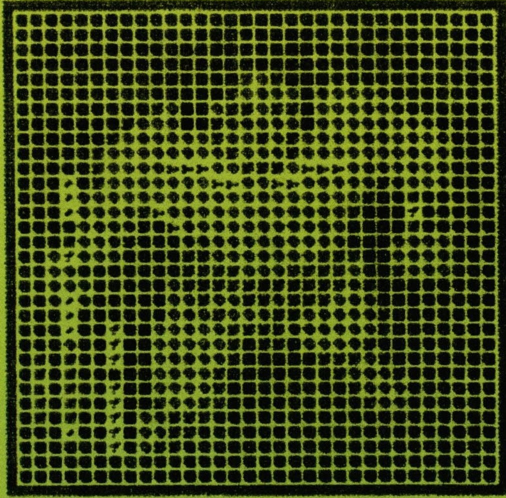
The cabinet was also quite unusual. It was large and players viewed the screen from different angles instead of just straight on: "I decided I did not want to have a Plexiglas shield in front of the monitor. I did this to reduce glare, which became unsolvable from four different viewpoints. [In those days having] no Plexiglas was unheard of, and many operators thought it was unsafe, despite our demonstrations dropping steel balls onto monitors," Logg says.

Although Logg is credited as the game's developer, he tips his hat to engineer Pat McCarthy for designing the hardware and to co-programmer Bob Flanagan for covering the development process while Logg went on sabbatical.

**Prior to 1985**, videogames were generally isolated to singleplayer

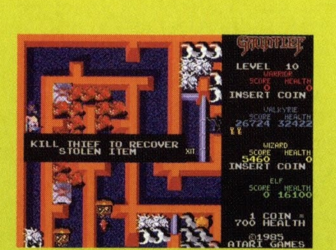

The juiciest potions didn't make an appearance until later in the game, and all were worth fighting for among the group



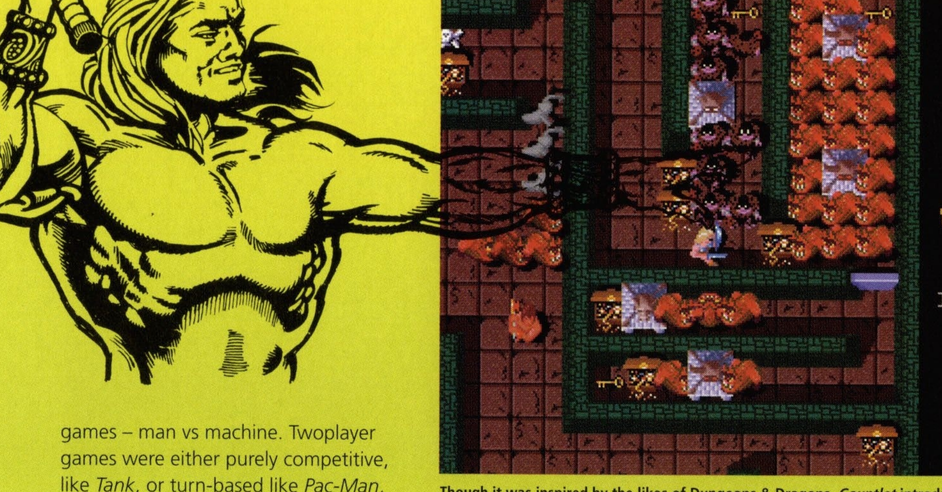



Atari used its own in-house graphics tools for sprite generation, but designs on paper were also used by Logg and his team of artists


Roast chicken with vegetables, golden amulets, chests of treasure and grog: what every good adventurer is seeking




Though small, *Gauntlet*'s sprites were capable of stirring emotion – especially when you'd just been robbed blind

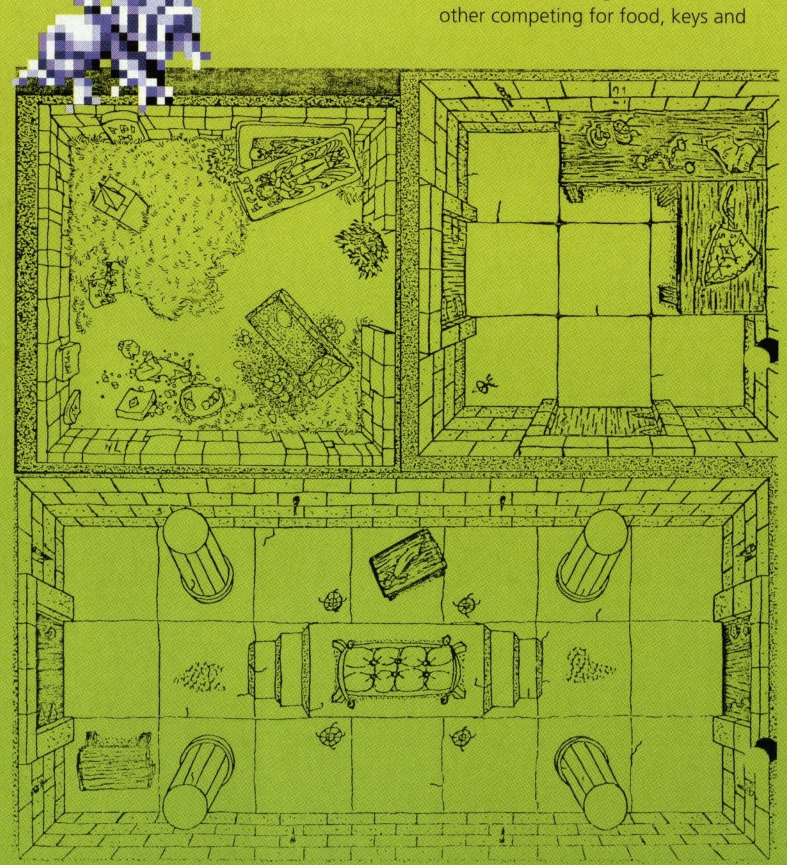



Though it was inspired by the likes of Dungeons & Dragons, *Gauntlet* introduced videogame mechanics – notably monster generators, which spewed out baddies until destroyed – to maintain an urgent pace

games – man vs machine. Twoplayer games were either purely competitive, like *Tank*, or turn-based like *Pac-Man*. *Gauntlet* introduced a simultaneous Man + man + man + man vs machine type of gameplay, and there were many advantages to this new concurrent multiplayer game. *Gauntlet* was more social, as gamers had to co-operate and talk to each other in order to clear a level of the dungeon. But that co-operation often strayed as players turned against each other competing for food, keys and treasure. Enhancing this need for co-operation was *Gauntlet*'s introduction of class-based characters. When you walked up to the game, you got to choose a protagonist – Warrior, Elf, Valkyrie or Wizard, and each had different strengths and weaknesses. A deficiency in one character could be supplanted by an asset of another. For example, while the Warrior is slow and strong, the Elf is weak but fast. Although the variables were simplistic, the teamwork spawned from *Gauntlet*'s class-based system can be seen in all sorts of multiplayer sports, adventure, and firstperson shooter games today.

Synthesized voice had been sporadically used in games in the early '80s. It was introduced as a novelty, but with *Gauntlet* the voice became a constant presence, acting as a constant guide or dungeon master. Most notably, players laughed at the poor sap who was told by the machine that he "needs food badly". The dungeon master provided humour and a launching point for animosity among players. Logg and team were aware of what they were doing: "We just used the voice to give this impression and provide comic relief as well as pointing out helpful or not so helpful things like, 'the wizard has eaten all the food lately'" – which of course was a sure indication the other players would turn on the wizard.

**Field tests for** new coin-op games are a well-guarded secret. They're a



These crypts with their stone doorways never made it into the final game. What's interesting about this art is the *Atic Atac*-like perspective, which was clearly changed once the game went into production




Bonus rounds involving all the treasure you could carry (or at least reach before the timer ran out) provided light relief between killing ghosts and lobbers. But you didn't know where you'd be next

As is evident from this early screen mockup, the game had the working title of simply *Dungeons*




Naturally, operators were able to tickle the cabinets dipswitches in order to make your money worth less health. Whatever the settings, though, Atari's game was a major earner for the coin-op giant

chance for developers to test players' interest and decide how much revenue the game could pull in.

However, before Atari Games Corp could find out, someone blew *Gauntlet*'s cover. Word leaked out that there was a new four-person multiplayer game in a small arcade in San Jose, California. Reports came in that Sega and other game manufacturers had shown up at the arcade and begun taking pictures. Fearing that the competition had their eyes on stealing the game, Logg quickly instructed the management to pull the game. It was a necessary defensive move that, unfortunately, didn't allow Logg's team to witness even a full week of testing. That wasn't a problem, as the little testing Logg did see proved that *Gauntlet* was about to change the way people played games: "There was a sign above the game that said play was limited to a certain number of tokens while others were waiting. I saw players dump large numbers of tokens into the game at one time. I had never seen this before. I must say it really made my day," recalls Logg.

**"TO BECOME A GREAT GAUNTLET PLAYER YOU HAD TO PLAY BY YOURSELF. OTHER PLAYERS BECAME AN UNKNOWN VARIABLE"**

Logg has met and witnessed great *Asteroids* and *Centipede* players, but never any great *Gauntlet* players. That's because to become a great *Gauntlet* player you had to play by yourself. *Gauntlet* was rarely a singleplayer game, and other players became an unknown variable you couldn't control. "After releasing *Gauntlet* in Japan, we heard rumours of players who could play forever," remembers Logg. Not believing it, Logg's team received a video showing it actually being done. "So we had to add code that would start removing food from the level if we detected players playing this well."

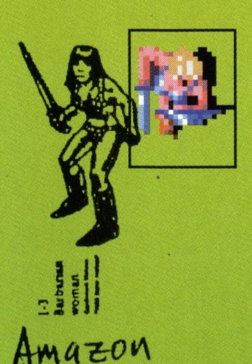
The reason solo players flourished in Japan rather than elsewhere is because new players there would often ask permission to join. Unfortunately for them, the answer was often 'no'. In the US arcades, players wouldn't bother asking and would just drop their quarters into the machine. Japanese gaming culture prevented others from joining in, thus negating *Gauntlet*'s multiplayer playability and its revenue potential.

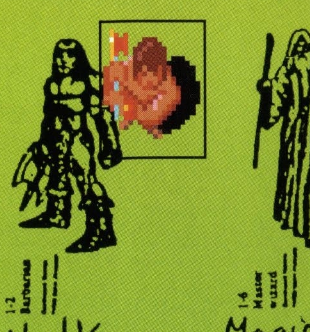
**To arcade owners,** *Gauntlet*'s most amazing achievement was its ability to quickly generate revenue. One arcade operator in Toronto, Canada, would always thank Logg for giving him *Gauntlet* because it earned him the most money of any game he had ever had. He raked in a whopping US$2,000 in a week, and that was enough to pay for the game in less than two weeks.

Even though the concept of multiplayer gaming had yet been tested, Logg knew gamers were eager to play co-operatively: "At one time, marketing clearly asked: 'How do we get total strangers to play together?' I guess the answer is to build a great game. I'm glad I had a chance to prove them wrong."



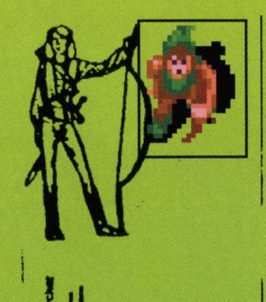
Only some of your foes were capable of flinging projectiles. Death himself didn't need to bother with such things, of course

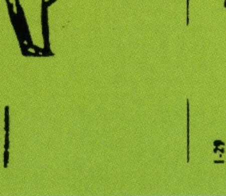


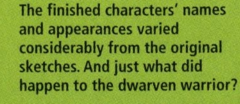












The finished characters' names and appearances varied considerably from the original sketches. And just what did happen to the dwarven warrior?



# Studio profile

## The people behind the games

**COMPANY NAME:** Tantalus

**DATE FOUNDED:** 1994

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 36 (Australian Studio only)

**HEAD OF STUDIO:** Tom Crago (below)





*Unreal II* was a great example of how Tantalus showed they can successfully add extra features into top-notch conversions, working in XMP (multiplayer), something the PC version lacked out of the box.

**URL:** www.tantalus.com.au

**KEY STAFF:**
Andrew Bailey, CTO and founder; Trevor Nuridin, founder; Arthur Kakouris, founder; John Szoke, Producer; Rohan Westbury, Producer; Paul Seedy, Senior Programmer; David Hewitt, Game Designer

**PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGIES:**
True pioneers, Tantalus has developed their Mercury engine over the course of ten years, and their CRIS engines for the GBA has powered many top titles. More recently they have created the JANUS and Mercury Plus engine for GBA and PSP respectively.

**SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:**

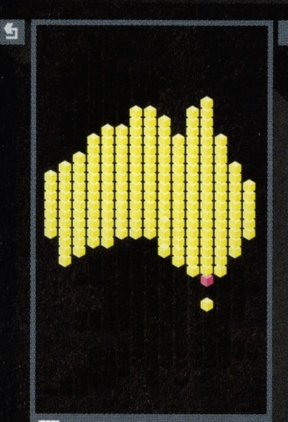
**Original Titles:**
Monster Truxk Madness (GBA)
Top Gear Rally (GBA)
ATV Quad Power Racing (GBA)
Flintstones - Dino to the Rescue (GBA)
Looney Tunes Space Race (PS2)
Woody Woodpeck in Crazy Castle 5 (GBA)
Mary Kate and Ashley Winner's Circle (PSone)
Equestriad 2001 (PC, PSone)
South Park Rally (PC, PSone, N64, DC)

**Conversions:**
Unreal II (Xbox - Atari)
Men in Black 2 (GC - Infogrames)
Manx TT Superbike (PC, Saturn - Sega of Japan)
The House of the Dead (PC, Saturn - Sega of Japan)



The Tantalus crew from the Melbourne TeaHouse HQ.

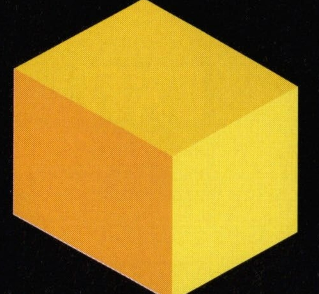


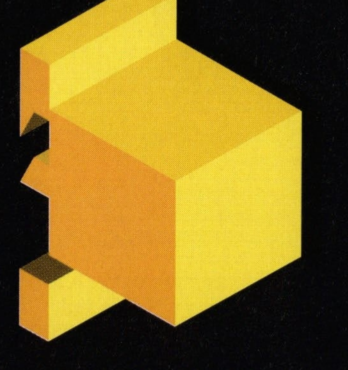



**LOCATIONS:**
Head Studio & Office: Melbourne
Mobile Gaming Division: Malaysia

**CURRENT PROJECTS:**
*Trickstar* (GBA)
*Metal Shell* (PS2, Xbox)
There're also several Tantalus titles in development for both the DS and PSP amongst other things, but they are pending official announcements via their respective publishers.

## Edge Moves







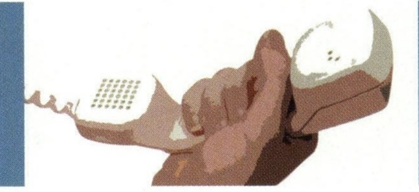
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# LOCAL CALL

## A phone call to the Australian development scene

## Tantalus CEO Tom Crago on the next-gen handhelds



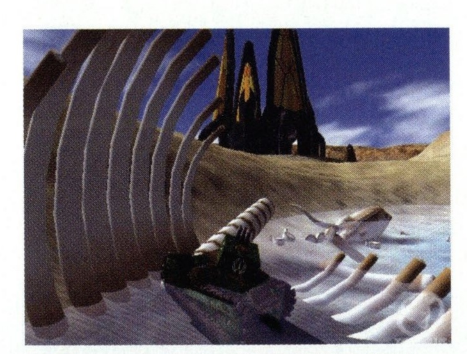
With a proven track record in handheld gaming thanks to titles like *TG Rally* on the GBA, it's small wonder that Tantalus are one of the first Australian developers to start tackling both a Nintendo DS and a PSP title. It's an even smaller wonder that they're one of the early adopters of the new platforms when you consider their expertise with handhelf game engines. CRIS has proved to be one of the most successful engines available to GBA developers, but their new JANUS engine looks likely to be their last big 'gift' to the GameBoy development community. Having already created the Mercury Plus engine for PSP, they're the authority from amongst the Australian development circuit to speak to when it comes to the future of handheld gaming. Tantalus CEO Tom Crago fielded this call…

**Tantalus has experienced success creating games for handheld systems like the GBA, such as *TG Rally* and *Monster Truck Madness*. Do you expect that experience to pay off with your upcoming DS and PSP projects?**

TC: Certainly I believe our GBA experience will translate well to the new handheld platforms. Handheld games and console games are very different propositions from a design standpoint, and the fact that we've had success on GBA bodes very well. And yet the power and functionality of both the DS and PSP mean that the bar has certainly been raised.

**What are the main advantages and challenges your teams are finding with devloping for the Nintendo DS?**

TC: The DS is a very different machine to anything we've ever developed for. The primary challenge is a creative one. We're asking ourselves how we can best exploit its unique features to create games that are genuinely ground breaking. So it's a great challenge in a way, but a little daunting in that gamers have very high expectations of the platform. I'm sure Tantalus will be up to the task.



Metal Shell - Coming to PS2 and Xbox in 2005 from Tantalus

**How about the PSP? Is working with Sony's handheld a completely different scenario?**

TC: The PSP is very different. If you're making a game for DS and PSP, you're really making two different games. The things that stand out about the PSP are its sheer power, and the extraordinary quality of its screen. Personally, I'm also excited about the wireless possibilities, and about the UMD (Universal Media Disc).

**From a design point, how have the wireless capabilities of the DS and PSP affected the way you're looking at developing?**

TC: Ultimately, online functionality will be synonymous with all games. It's early days of course for the DS and PSP but I would expect that by the end of 2005 we'll start to see some titles that really exploit their wireless capabilities. Hopefully there will be one or two there from us.

**Nintendo have traditionally been the ones to run with relatively 'children friendly' content, but there are signs that's changing with DS. Has there been some sort of change of stance from Nintendo?**

TC: I haven't observed any change in policy but it's certainly the case that gamers are growing up. The little kid that was playing his GameBoy ten years ago is now lining up to buy a DS out of his own salary.

**In terms of raw grunt, how have you found the PSP and DS shape up in relation to existing systems out there, particularly the consoles from the same manufacturers?**

TC: The Sony PSP is similar in a lot of ways to the PlayStation 2. There are some things it does even more efficiently. The Nintendo DS is more like a N64, but again, it is such a unique machine that comparisons are difficult.

**Obviously Tantalus is an established company with a proven record, but looking at the new handheld systems, do you feel that market is going to prove a viable entry-point for smaller studios?**

TC: Obviously team sizes and budgets for DS and PSP titles will be smaller than for next generation console development. That said, we're still looking at quite large teams. It is an entry point, though, and it would be great to see smaller studios given the opportunity to work on these platforms. Hopefully the going is a little easier than on GBA.

**One last question on portable gaming then… How appealing is pushing into this market now that there are two new platforms from established industry portable gaming brands?**

TC: They haven't stopped us from getting right behind mobile gaming. Last year we started a studio in Malaysia called Tantalus Asia, which is focused wholly on developing games for mobile phones. We recently launched a Holden Racing Team game here in Australia.

"The DS is a very different machine to anything we've ever developed for. The primary challenge is a creative one..."

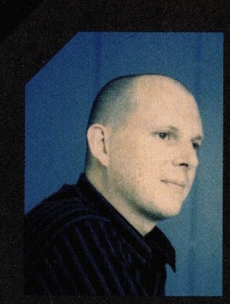
*Local Call is just that - a call to a local developer. If you have any comments, send them to: Edge@derwenthoward.com.au*

# Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

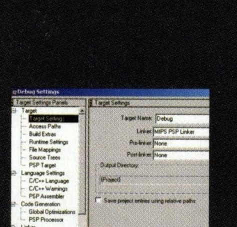
## All in hand

**With three powerful handheld devices launched in late 2004, tools companies and game developers alike are having to up the ante**

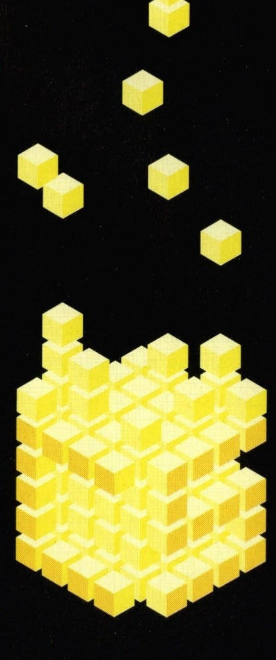


Phil Harrison, executive vice president of development, SCEE
www.scee.com

www.gizmondo.com
www.fathammer.com
www.snsys.com
www.metrowerks.com



One of the main concerns of developers has been to get access to development tools for the new handheld devices. Final releases of thirdparty tools such as those offered by SN Systems and Metrowerks, as well as official devkits, only started shipping in late summer



Marking the start of the rolling global launches for Tiger Telematic's Gizmondo, Sony's PSP and Nintendo's DS, the summer of 2004 sees a new era for handheld gaming devices. Previously characterised by the child-like feel of the Game Boys, the market has upgraded with a new grown-up feel; something demonstrated, not least, in the ergonomic design of the units. But perhaps more significant for developers is the jump from 2D graphics to hardware-accelerated 3D. Indeed, the step in graphical power is remarkable: the equivalent jump for consoles being a transition from Nintendo's early-'90s SNES directly to 1999's PlayStation2.

"PSP's polygonal throughput is slightly, but only slightly, lower than PS2 and the pixel fill rate is about the same. However, the pixel operations of the PSP are a bit more advanced than PS2, so the end results can be better," says **Phil Harrison**, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe's executive vice president of development. "So, although marginally less is being rendered onto the screen, the overall experience is probably better than PS2, especially when you factor in using headphones and the controlled listening environment that results."

Great news for gamers, of course, but it does create something of a quandary for handheld developers who, typically, have worked in much smaller teams and to much shorter schedules than their console-based colleagues. Now they are having to bulk-up and learn new tools and skills to fulfil the potential. So it's apt timing that crucial development tools, both from device manufacturers such as Sony and Nintendo and from thirdparty vendors like Bristol-based SN Systems and Texan outfit Metrowerks are now, finally, becoming available.

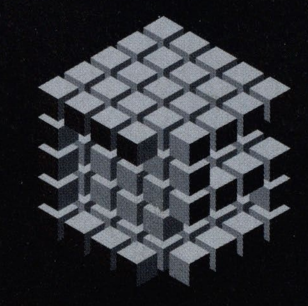
"Sega is pleased especially that important functions such as .NET integration, fast compile speed and good debugger GUI have featured from early versions of SN System's ProDG for PSP," says **Yuji Naka**, Sega's R&D creative officer. "It offers us rich functionality and is stable while keeping up with fast changes in game development."

Metrowerks' CodeWarrior integrated development environment (IDE) offers similar features; with the company releasing a version for PSP development as well as providing the IDE that ships with Nintendo's official DS tools, and handles its novel hardware features such as touch-screen input and voice recognition.

The availability of such tools is particularly key for PSP developers who had to use PC-based emulators for much of their initial work. Harrison reckons this provided a good starting point however: "I think it allowed teams to start on 'real' programming prior to the development kits arriving," he explains. "Many of our early PSP projects also benefited from some kind of OpenGL PC or PS2 implementation as a test-bed for animation, graphics and game design, for example. Once PSP development hardware arrived, the emulator code compiled remarkably quickly onto the PSP with only a few minor gotchas in the compilers to overcome."

Yet despite the similarities between the basic processors in PS2 and PSP, **Martin Day**, a co-director of SN Systems says there are significant differences: "The base instruction sets are the same but there are different custom extensions on each processor. In particular, the PSP's VFPU (floating point vector unit) is very different to the PS2's vector unit co-processor," he says. "As a result, our compiler and assembler need to work with different sets of instructions with different timings. Also, the debugger has to support a completely different kernel."

One result is that most, if not all, PSP development is new, with little code being taken from existing PlayStation2 games. "All SCEE firstparty games are ground up PSP developments," Harrison confirms. "Some internal routines, such as artificial intelligence or game logic, can be ported over as C or C++, but for



the most part it's all new." One studio which has successfully made the jump from GBA-style development to PSP is US studio Backbone Entertainment, which was created by the merger of three non-traditional game companies: Digital Eclipse, ImaginEngine and Games2Learn. For example, its *Death Jr* title was the first game shown running on PSP hardware at the 2004 Game Developers Conference in San Jose.

Senior producer **Chris Carla** says the company has adjusted well to the change: "Both PSP and DS are pretty straightforward to develop for, there's no Saturn or PS2-style weirdness," he says. "The PSP is basically like working on any 3D console. It's probably closest to GameCube in terms of how you deal with the machine and performance. DS has more limited 3D capabilities, but obviously the dual screens and touchscreen offer a lot in terms of gameplay." Aside from the main Sony and Nintendo products is the dark horse that is Tiger Telematics' Gizmondo. Using a similar ARM CPU to one of the two found in Nintendo's DS, the Gizmondo was originally designed without 3D acceleration. Comparisons, particularly to PSP, meant that a last minute decision was made to add a custom 3D chip – Nvidia's GoForce 3D 4500. Designed for high-end PDAs and smartphones, the GoForce 4500 supports high resolution graphics including 40bit colour, programmable shaders and bilinear and trilinear texture filtering.

Crucially, it also comes with Nvidia's much hyped nPower technology for preserving battery life. This is important as the extra transistors required for 3D acceleration require extra power. But thanks to nPower and additional engineering support from Nvidia, sources claim Gizmondo's overall battery life has been improved by GoForce 3D 4500's introduction. Speculation continues to run hot concerning PSP's battery life, however. The issue is that in addition to its large processors, PSP uses a CD-style media – Sony's proprietary UMD format – which consumes power when data is being streamed from the disk to the system. For this reason, PSP developers will have to pay particular attention to the way they structure their games' loading operations.

As Harrison points out: "Battery life is a function of many things like sub-CPU useage, memory access and disk spin up and down and, as part of that, game design can have a big influence, too."

While assimilating skills from the console world, it seems that developers will have to continue to pay attention to the nuances of handheld devices to get the most out of these new opportunities.

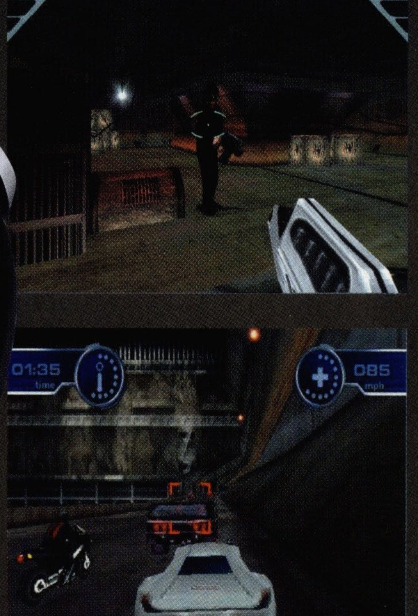


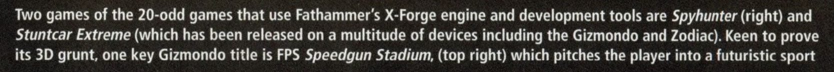
**While many of the tools providers for PSP and DS support console development, the market also creates a gap for new entrants. One such is Finnish company Fathammer. Its X-Forge 3D engine, tool chains and development environment was designed for high-end mobile phones and PDAs, but has been upgraded for more complex hardware.**

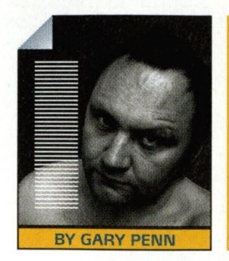
**"The most striking feature of mobile platforms is the enormous variation which affects even the most basic features of the devices, such as controls and screen resolutions," muses the company's chief technology officer and co-founder Arto Astala. "What we've done is put an enormous amount of effort to empower developers in overcoming this variability and to decouple the different aspects, so they can tackle each issue separately."**

**Already well established in the phone market, the company's first gain up was Tapwave's Zodiac handheld. It has since become a core tool for N-Gage and Gizmondo developers as well, with over 20 commercially-available games using the technology. The company is also looking at extending support for DS and PSP. One example of a game that has scaled well across all devices is the 3D racing game *Stuntcar Extreme*, which runs on a range of devices from UIQ phones and Nokia Series 60 devices to Zodiac and now Gizmondo.**





Two games of the 20-odd games that use Fathammer's X-Forge engine and development tools are *Spyhunter* (right) and *Stuntcar Extreme* (which has been released on a multitude of devices including the Gizmondo and Zodiac). Keen to prove its 3D grunt, one key Gizmondo title is FPS *Speedgun Stadium*, (top right) which pitches the player into a futuristic sport



BY GARY PENN

# MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

## Ceremonies

I like order – if only to give me the satisfaction of ignoring or undermining it. Like most people, if I don't have pots to piss in, I use the floor. There aren't many pots in game design – let alone pots that actually prove useful in the process of development. That's why we end up wading waist-deep in sloppy shit like 'gameplay': stupid, lazy shorthand for anyone trying to sound informed or clever or artistic (like me, especially in the '80s).

"It's all about gameplay." Really? That's helpful. Is that how the game plays? How well the game plays? How the game can be played (cf: tactile, tactical and strategic 'gameplay')? The rules of the game? How the game is controlled? How well its tactile, visual and audible qualities are attuned? The essence of the game in play? The very stuff of play? All of these things? More? All of these things and more mean 'gameplay', so I'm told. It means so many different things to different people that it's worthless. It's a mirage and utterly unnecessary.

A word I find far more useful – especially in recent years – is 'ceremony'. It started with a need to classify the components of an entertainment product. There's more to making games than building and exploiting toysets and rules – so many other components that aren't necessarily clearly defined or are typically lumped together under the delightful notion of 'front-end'. What this – and more besides – amounts to are rituals marked by ceremonies.

Even the smallest of games on the simplest of platforms can easily feature dozens of ceremonies and the numbers run into hundreds – thousands – as the scale and platforms grow. All those components to consider, design, build, assemble, test, refine...

Infoplease.com's summary of ceremony: "[An] expression of shared feelings and attitudes through more or less formally ordered actions of an essentially symbolic nature performed on appropriate occasions. Ceremonies express, perpetuate and transmit elements of the value and sentiment system and aim at preserving such values and sentiments from doubt and opposition; moreover, they intensify the solidarity of the participants."

Ceremonies are deeply intertwined in everything from smoking to sex. Ceremonies reinforce, remind, welcome, warn, set the scene, stimulate the senses and get players 'in the mood' (think foreplay). Ceremonies are incentives to play and sustain player interest. Ceremonies frame and punctuate play, principally the start and end of play.

> "Ceremonies are deeply intertwined in everything from smoking to sex. Ceremonies reinforce, remind, welcome, stimulate the senses"

Ceremonies confirm the occurrence of events – principally those out of the ordinary, such as consecutive, concurrent or repetitive moments. Ceremonies provide affirmation of player existence, appraisal of player performance and reinforcement of player value.

Ceremonies take the form of simple but pronounced effects or extravagant spectacle. Typically terms such as 'FMV' and 'cut-scene' are used to describe more cinematic ceremonies, but these presuppose a form. Minor ceremonies recognise the selection of options. Mario changes to or from Super Mario. An activated console announces itself through ceremony.

Take a television game show and the attention lavished on the contestants within a clear framework. That distinctive Tarrant ritual in Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? that draws out the moment, builds the tension, before revealing that the contestant has given the right or wrong answer. The handing over of the cheque before snatching it away...

Ceremonies regularly and effectively punctuate cartoons – especially anime (no doubt a reflection of Japan's visible, respectful ceremonial culture). Films feature ceremonial establishing shots and distinctive forewarnings. We just aren't prepared without the right rite.

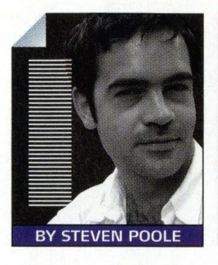
Sports make extensive use of ceremonies, with visible referees usually accompanied by crowds, cheerleaders, music and players. There are opening and closing ceremonies, awards ceremonies, preview and review ceremonies (usually via commentators). There are ceremonies for players entering or leaving play, prior to play starting or during play as the result of injury, broken rules, scoring or substitutions.

Thinking about ceremonies encourages paying attention to players. We adore spectacle. We crave it. Ceremony is everything – particularly when we are at its heart. I am the player. I am the centre of the universe. Play revolves around me. This is all for my benefit.

The use of ceremonies makes all the difference. The latest *Burnout* would be a far less satisfying experience if it weren't for its well-crafted ceremonies (especially its commendable use of camera cuts – a technique our industry seems to fear as much as early cinema did). Ceremony is a key aspect of information design – a critical area of design seldom formally considered in the development of virtual toys and games. The use of ceremony represents a huge area of consideration – a sizeable slice of information design providing focus for a powerful component of entertainment.

*Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki*





BY STEVEN POOLE

# TRIGGER HAPPY

## Mad world

It's a strange world I live in. Morality has been mathematised. Utterly incommensurate actions are all given points on the same two-dimensional scale of good or bad. If I physically abuse a child who is bullying another, that is a good deed. (Violence is the only language they understand, you see.) However, if I physically abuse a child who wants to commit vandalism and theft, that is for some reason a bad deed.

The moral arithmetic of whether I am, overall, a good or bad person becomes absurd. I can expiate the gratuitous killing of an innocent civilian by killing a few wasps in the forest. Neglecting my wife so that she divorces me is more evil than actually beating her to death with my fists. If I am harassed by the authorities for having committed theft or murder, I can simply pay a fine. On the other hand, this weird free-for-all is married to certain extremely conservative social conventions. Sex before marriage is not merely frowned upon, it is actually impossible.

This world is, of course, Albion, the setting of *Fable*. Now, *Fable* is not a bad game. In many ways it's very interesting: it's one of those hugely ambitious yet deeply flawed videogames that we might cherish more than games that execute brilliantly a conventional concept. (Although I am still reminded every time a game such as *Fable* comes along of the unparalleled genius of *Ocarina Of Time*.) But the moral system of *Fable* is deeply broken. Sure, you can laugh it off and have fun anyway, but if you think morality in videogames is an interesting area of exploration it's worth looking at why it doesn't work here. I think that the very bizarreness and inconsistency of *Fable*'s morality system teaches us an important lesson, with wide ramifications in videogame design. The lesson is this: the application of a computational approach to human experience can easily lead to absurd consequences, so great care is needed.

"The application of a computational approach to human experience can easily lead to absurd consequences, so great care is needed"

We've actually been through this before, in the history of philosophy. Utilitarianism, as proposed by John Stuart Mill and others in the 19th century, was an attempt to apply reasoned mathematical calculus to ethical problems. To simplify somewhat, actions were considered morally worthy if they minimised the overall suffering or maximised the overall pleasure of a group of people (or, later, animals). Early critics delighted in pointing out the absurd consequences of such calculations by inventing clever thought experiments, and the utilitarians responded by refining and finessing their calculus, adding more axes and variables, in order to take account of such situations and still accord with moral 'common sense'.

One thing that was very clear to the utilitarians right from the start, however, was that suffering weighed more heavily on one side of the equation than pleasure did on the other. It would not be permissible to torture one person to death to satisfy the voyeuristic, sadistic pleasure of a thousand others. On the other hand, it might well be compulsory to sacrifice one person to save the lives of a thousand, ten or even two others, if we could be totally certain that those consequences would follow (the fact that, in practical circumstances, we almost never could was a continuing flaw in Utilitarianism).

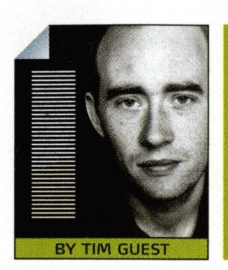
This, being only a very brief and crude sketch of the beginnings of Utilitarianism, is already vastly more sophisticated, and accords better with our ordinary moral intuition, than the moral calculus going on in *Fable*. But the fact that videogames are computational systems means that two centuries of argument about Utilitarianism can be considered directly relevant to any videogame that tries to treat of human ethics.

Now, I don't know if Peter Molyneux and his colleagues sat down and read everyone from J S Mill to Peter Singer while working on *Fable*. Maybe they did. If so, however, there's no sign of it. And if they didn't, why not? Many very clever people have already thought very deeply about similar problems. Why not exploit their intelligence? If you subscribe to a kind of reverse snobbery which says that philosophy has nothing to do with videogames (on account of the latter, perhaps, just being 'fun'), you doom yourself to playing games that will find it much harder to incorporate any kind of sophistication in the treatment of morality – and that sort of sophistication could actually make a game more fun. Molyneux himself seems to believe so, and I agree.

In general, one of the ways in which videogames are currently immature is that they seem to exist in a hermetic bubble, not referring to or drawing from the history of endeavour in other disciplines. There are exceptions, of course. Kojima mines film (although quite narrowly restricted to the Hollywood action genre); and there's often a lot of art-historical research and imagination worked by designers even into mediocre games. But why not use less obvious sources? Why not use philosophy, if it's directly relevant? Why not engage in the larger cultural conversation?

*Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). www.stevenpoole.net*






# THE GUEST COLUMN

## A different kind of grief

In August last year, architect Derek Jones built two full-scale 110-storey skyscrapers entirely out of wooden blocks. When the mammoth task was complete, he realised his constructions were an almost exact replica of the World Trade Centre's twin towers. So, along with a journalist, he invited a friend who had lost a relative in the attacks of September 11 2001 to sit inside the towers with him. Then, with the three of them still inside, he knocked the towers down.

The journalist, **Wagner James Au**, panicked when he lost sight of the horizon. "You want to run to a window and leap out, if only to get clear of the turmoil," he reported. "But in an instant, there simply is no window to jump from. Or even a floor on which to run." The sound of clattering wood surrounded them like machine-gun fire. As the towers fell, time seemed to slow to a crawl. Then, the whole world crashed to a halt.

Literally. Because all of this was nearly, but not quite, happening. Jones was in his apartment in Chicago. James Au was in his office in San Francisco. The buildings themselves were in the Olive district of an entirely virtual world called *Second Life*. The towers, which had taken just a day to build, were the largest constructions *Second Life* had ever seen. When they fell, the world crashed. Every player was ejected.

Later, Jones and his friends logged back in to *Second Life*. By then, the collapse was complete. Standing among the rubble, James Au asked the friend who'd lost a relative in the first collapse how it had felt to be inside. "It was closure for me," he said. "I wanted to know just what he went through. *Second Life* allows me to do that and live to tell the tale."

Until recently, in online worlds, 'player-grief' meant someone who threw grenades at his own team. But as virtual worlds become more complex, and their possibilities for interaction become more subtle, a new way of expressing grief has begun to take shape. The California-developed *Second Life*, where this phenomenon began, is perhaps the world's most morally complex virtual world. In *Second Life* there are no set goals, no guidelines at all about what is or is not possible. You can build what you like, be what you like, say what you like: as long as you don't offend other players. And that's where the problems really start.

> "Throughout millennia, mankind has dreamed alone. Now in our virtual worlds we are able to share and inhabit each other's dreams"

In the rubble of the towers, a crowd began to form. Then the crowd began to argue. Some were fascinated by the spectacle. Others were furious at such insensitive re-enactment. Later, on the *Second Life* bulletin boards, the argument raged on. **Damiana Domino** called the project 'really tasteless' and argued that painful memories should be left out of *Second Life*. "It's unfortunate that in a place where no physical harm can come to us, we still find ways to hurt each other," wrote **Ananda Sandgrain**, a Manhattan resident in her first life. The event was tasteless, **David Cartier** thought, and Au's coverage was "sensationalist and exploitative".

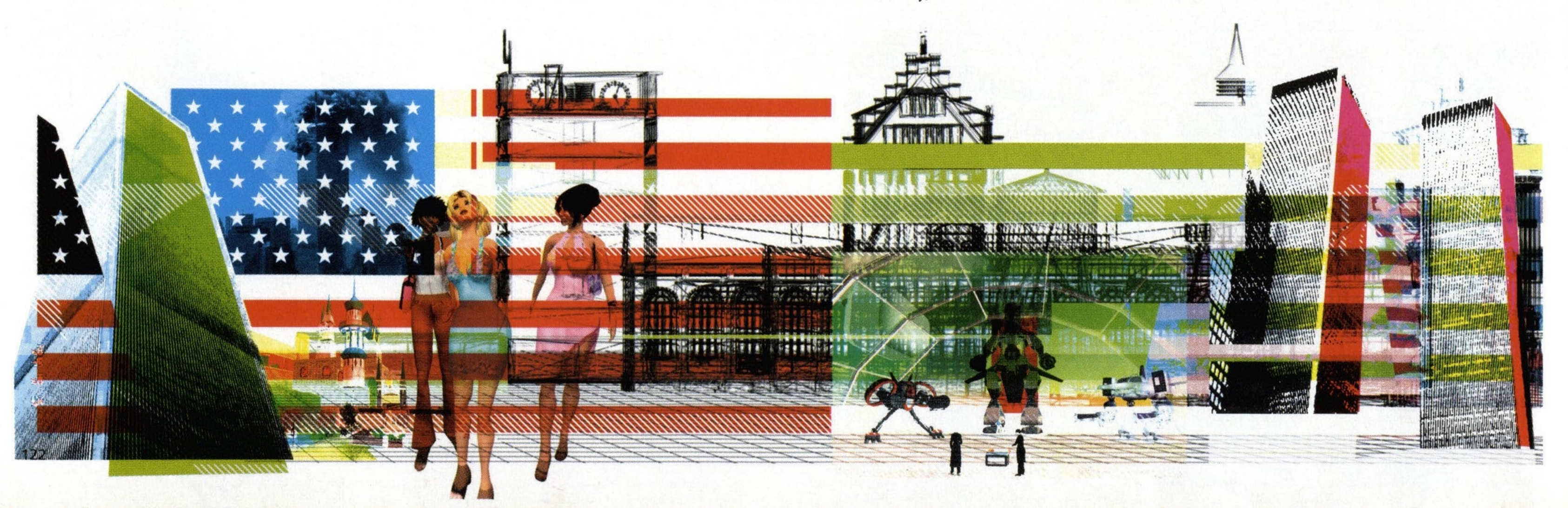
Others, however, disagreed. "If you didn't like what was going on then you could just go elsewhere," **RisingShadow** wrote. "We share a multi-cultural world of diverse ideas," added **Kohne Kato**. "For our own sanity, we must be tolerant." "This is just a game," said **Brad Lupis**. "Yet another one who just doesn't get it," **Grim Lupis** (no relation) replied. "This is just a game to you. To others, it's something completely different."

This year, *Second Life* residents constructed hundreds of September 11 memorials. Most avoided controversy: they built virtual memorial gardens, or virtual memorial plaques, or virtual memorial statues of NY firemen raising the American flag. But one resident, Sexy Casanova, bit the bullet and constructed a much more detailed replica of the World Trade Centre. Perhaps crucially for his popularity ratings, he didn't knock them down. Even so, many residents took a while to accept it. "At first I thought it was morbid," **Olympia Reebus** said about the World Trade Centre's third incarnation. "But now I realise it's a way to never forget."

No other form of expression seems to have this impact. Theatre lost its ability to shock back in the mid-'60s; Andres Serrano's Piss Christ angers only the fundamentalist or the naïve. But in virtual worlds, it seems, there is still everything to play for. Throughout millennia, mankind has dreamed alone. Now, suddenly, in our virtual worlds we are able to share and inhabit each other's dreams. But wherever human beings share things, fights break out, and our virtual worlds are no exception. In moments like the second World Trade Centre crash, what should be a virtual utopia descends into yet another struggle over right and wrong.

"I have a question," **Emericus Phaeton** writes, in the final September 11 comment on the *Second Life* bulletin board: "When does *Third Life* come out so we can escape our second one?"

*Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta*




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# inbox

In **E3**'s interview with Reggie Fils-Aime I noted that he made references to Nintendo trying to recapture the 'prototypical 20-year-old' market, and protesting that DS would not just be for your younger brother. The purpose of this, presumably, was to counter the widespread perception of Sony's PSP as being a more grown-up machine than Nintendo's effort. This, though, raises the question of what we mean by gaming for grown-ups. If it is to be determined by average user age, then fine, I'm sure that the sleek and stylish PSP will indeed sell more to higher age groups than DS will – because of its high price point, for one thing. The main reason for this, though, will be the brightly coloured universes already apparent in the majority of the DS's software lineup. According to the criteria by which most other media are judged, these do indeed appear childish. However, the trouble is that, by other media's standards, so do the opposition's more 'mature' titles.

Aesthetically speaking, properties like *Devil May Cry* and *Grand Theft Auto* are actually just as childish as the Mushroom Kingdom, but in a different way – they are adolescent. To my mind, the word 'adult' in relation to games is often merely a synonym for 'high levels of violence', perhaps even with the odd ill-judged obscenity or faintly embarrassing sexual reference. In other media, 'adult' implies something that is complex, challenging and engaging, perhaps saying something interesting about the world. I can think of few videogames that really do this, other than by appropriating means of expression from other media in a fashion that is generally inept and jarring to the game itself – as in *Metal Gear Solid*'s dreadful cut-scenes.

This lack of true maturity by the standards of other media does not invalidate the games, of course, as they are not of those other media and, thus, shooting zombies in *Resident Evil* is, on its own terms, fun. It is not, however, inherently adult, even less so when you take the pathetic plot into account. Nor is it truly infantile – it is simply enjoyable in an age-neutral way, like having a game of football. The game works because it plays well, not necessarily because of the T-virus and the digitised blood. Other than as a basic motivation for an already-designed game mechanic, plot has little place in videogames outside of RPGs. Instead of pursuing abortive synergies with other media, it is my contention that videogames should give up on this arbitrary demarcation between the childish and the adult and realise that, in essence, there is no such thing as a 'mature' title, simply good games and bad games, whatever particular aesthetic drapery they choose to dress themselves up in or whatever weird input methods they may adopt. Or maybe I just want to justify to myself the fact that I really *really* want to play *Mr Driller* with a stylus.

**Steven Tucker**

Some very healthy, objective thinking. But there are other takes on Nintendo's manoeuvres...

## Seeing a new piece of hardware trying to boost itself with a Super Mario 64 clone is outrageous. I wonder what the '64' element really implies

I wonder whether the fact that the NDS looks set to dominate the gaming industry purely on grounds of 'revolution' leaves any room for comment before we succumb to Nintendo's brainwashing and the patronising ideas of what gaming should be like from now on.

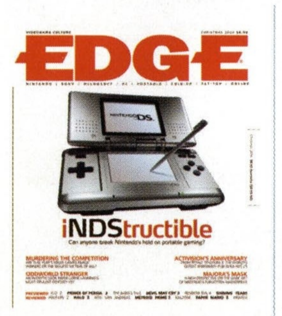
I may be but a humble gamer who grew up on Nintendo, occasionally brought to tears while playing *Zelda* games, but that shouldn't suggest that I might buy into whatever the Kyoto ex-giant sells me.

Sequels can be good; new input methods can be even better. However, seeing a new piece of hardware trying to boost itself with a *Super Mario 64* clone is downright outrageous. I wonder what the '64' element really implies. Is it 64bit gobbledygook, or is it actually the 64th sequel of a Mario title? And why do I have to be excited about the prospect of playing *Mario 64* DS this Christmas? Did I not play it to death five years ago? Why do I have to put up with Nintendo's nonsense about minigames and wi-fi connectivity? What's wi-fi?

For the past 15 years or so, all I have been asking for in return for my $100 visit to my local games store was a good game – not a minigame-enhanced sequel or *Pokémon* anachronisms




**Is an update of SM64 enough to make NDS desirable? Yiannis Alexious reckons not**




**Issue 3**




**Oh, Edge. I'll forgive you because I love you. But now I can't look at you without thinking of the good old days when we didn't need to overdose on graphics and colours to have a good time. Just page after page of solidly written text was enough for us back then. I hope it's just the excitement of trying something new and that you'll settle down again soon.**

**But if we're going to make this relationship work, we need some ground rules:**

**1. Serif or sans? Decide, for god's sake (sans, please).**

**2. Bring back RedEye.**

Paul Westerman

**PS Love the new rating system.**

**But the new rating system is the same as the old one. Really. Isn't it?**



redressing their lack of ideas with wi-fi cinema downloads.
**Yiannis Alexiou**

There are a number of ways of looking at this. On the one hand it's easy to demand that Nintendo produces, say, an entirely new 3D *Mario* title on DS because it's a new platform with new methodologies and it needs to make a splash, while on the other you could say that attempting to reproduce one of the truly best games of all time on a new handheld system would be just the thing to do in order to give it a much-needed dose of credibility. Neither is necessarily right; we'll see how *Mario* on NDS affects its sales very soon.

## The knock-on effect of this growth is that the main marketplace, where development bucks can really be invested, is looking for established game styles

I was reading your review of *Juiced* in issue 2, and also reading about Juice Games' unfortunate state of flux with Acclaim going bankrupt, and that THQ has picked up the game instead. Thing is, THQ are committing only to a Summer 2005 release, willing to give the game more development time. I'm not suggesting that the game itself is going to be reinvented in this time, but let's hope they take your points – and of other reviews that got through before the delay – on board.

In light of this development, have you considered whether reviewing this year rather than next year is fair? And if so would **Edge** ever re-review a game given the correct conditions, or have you ever had to? It makes me wonder if Juice Games knowingly released beta review copies (following schedule, of course) to gain valuable review information, or even if **Edge** has ever reviewed games that never got released... because, somehow, both of these events happened. I can just imagine this being explained away five years later in Reset or a feature on premature/doomed reviews!

My concern for *Juiced* is not one of bias, just one of interest. By admission I do have a few friends who are working on the game, and for quite some time I've been quite interested to see what they would produce for me, their humble gamer. Now all I'm left with is two counts of disappointment – one of gladness and another of hope... but still no game. Ultimately, though, there are plenty more good racing titles either on their way or already out to buy, comparison to which *Juiced* now avoids. Or has that already happened?
**Mark De Brito**

*Juiced* was sent in to the **Edge** office clearly marked as a review copy before the unfortunate demise of Acclaim came to light. If a new version of the game appears next year, we will definitely re-review it. And good luck to the team with the refinements.

Noticing that marketing has again become the whipping boy of many, I thought I'd raise my head above the parapet and defend this noble discipline, because it's all too easy to point fingers when we see a market that is seemingly shorn of continued creative growth and freedoms.

The question is: would this market ever have got as big as it has without good marketing? I doubt it. It still would've been 'bedroom', which would have made some happy, but not those who also expect to tap into the benefits of success in the mainstream (we've all seen the fast cars and posh offices!).

The knock-on effect of this growth is that the main marketplace, where the development bucks can really be invested, is looking for established styles of games – sport sims, driving games, shooters, RPGs – and this is because there is enough potential for return on investment. New, groundbreaking, ideas will have to start off as small investments, to test the marketplace, because, like all games, they still have to be profitable.

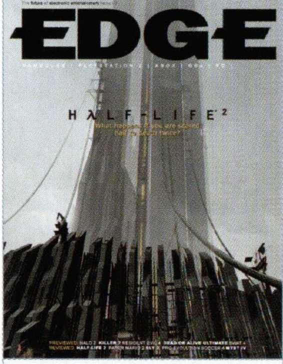
I would echo **Edge**'s assertion that the best marketers really know their products and support this with the counterpoint: the best creatives understand who they are marketing to. Miyamoto, Suzuki and others really understand what turns on the gaming public – they create games for others, not themselves. There are too many creatives who create for themselves, or for their peers, or for awards.

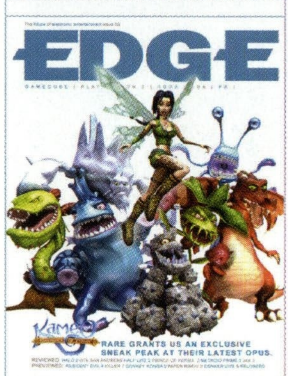
Even the best creatives have had bad moments: Kubrick made Eyes Wide Shut. *Rez*, for all its strengths, was a failure. Even the article on *Ico 2* in **E2** was very revealing about how creatives learn the hard way about market mechanics – which they are aiming to get right this time. It's all about learning from experience.
**John Braithwaite**

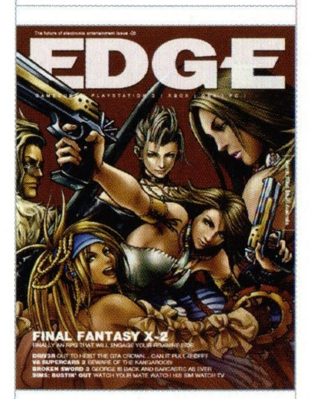
**A little something from the Edge readership - this time the community from the Evolution forums - http://s7.invisionfree.com/Evolution/index.php.**

**With an avid interest in the publication, forum members started a competition amongst themselves as to who could design the best Edge cover.**

**Below are three of the best entries into this unofficial contest, which produced more than a few promising reslts...**



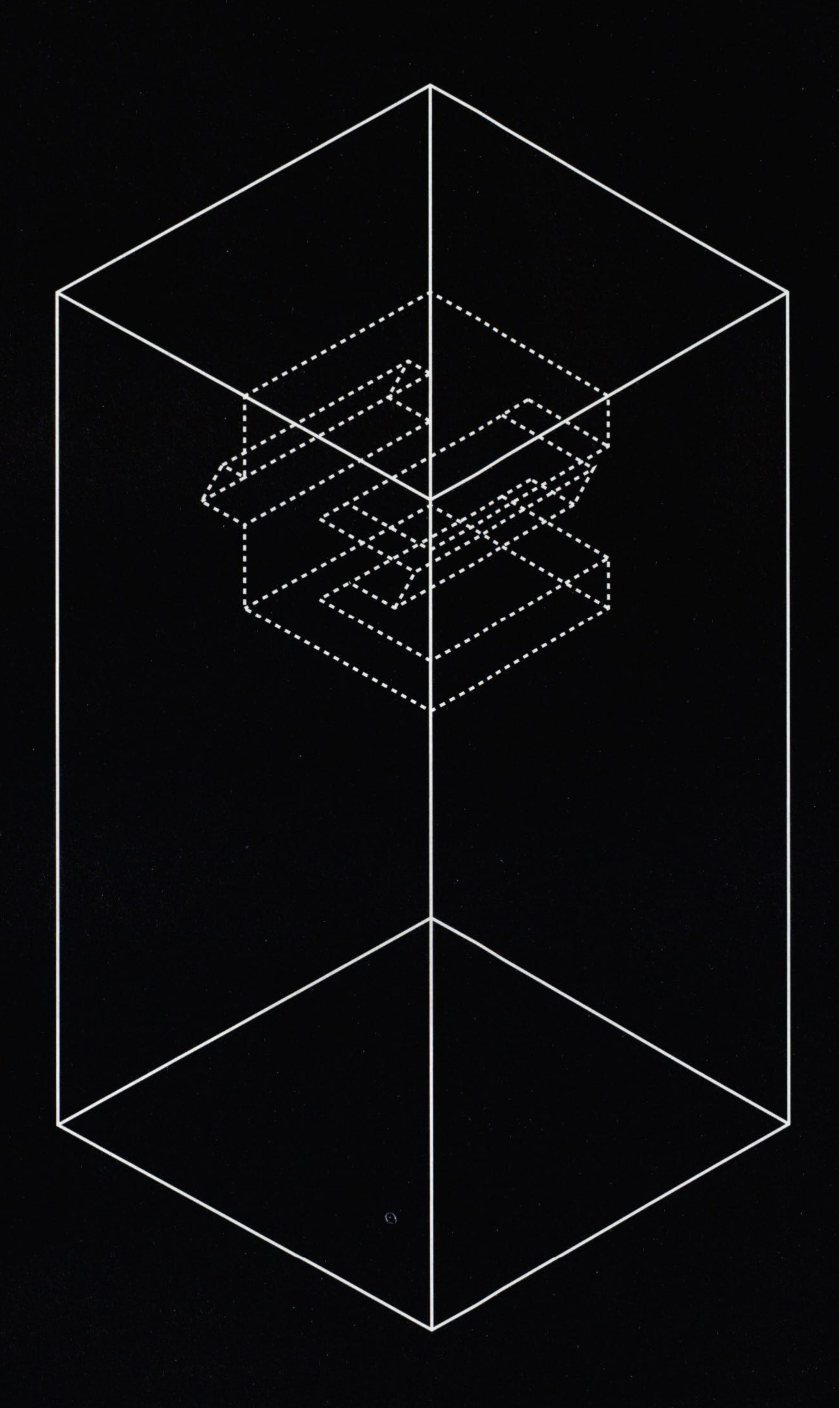




**Entries from Metallix, GnomeyG and Markymark. Those are pseudonyms, not a case of some cruel parenting.**

I read about the problems Microsoft are having with pirated copies of *Halo 2* circulating the web, and I have to say that Microsoft are partially to blame here (although I obviously don't condone piracy). Sony lost millions in pirated games for the original PlayStation and with the PS2 have taken a much stronger line: of the many PS2 owners I know, none have had these modded to allow pirated games, and none intend to. Yet of the Xbox owners I know one of the reasons they purchased the Xbox over the PS2 was the ease with which it could be modded, with Microsoft seemingly turning a blind eye to allow for a greater number of console sales to increase market share over their main competitor. Now with the amount of pirated Xbox games available and the impact it will undoubtedly have on their prime IP's sales this Christmas they suddenly seem to be on the offensive. Maybe it is time that all the major console developers get together and share ideas on how to beat piracy fully for the next platforms, or will Microsoft continue to turn a blind eye for Xbox 2 just to get a few more sales over the PS3?
**Duncan Stewart**

You're getting uncomfortably close to conspiracy-theory territory. Be sure of this: with PS3 and XB2, anti-piracy measures will be seriously serious. Once there's been some time to take stock of just how profitable Valve's online sales model is, you can bet that it will be on the shortlist of Sony and Microsoft as viable anti-piracy and content delivery systems.



# Next issue

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